Definition: Murdoch, (Jean) Iris from Philip's Encyclopedia

British novelist and moral philosopher, b. Ireland. Murdoch created her own genre, the philosophical love story. Her early novels, culminating in The Bell (1958), are short and concise. Her later novels, such as The Black Prince (1973), the Booker Prize-winning The Sea, the Sea (1978), The Good Apprentice (1985), and The Book and the Brotherhood (1987), are longer and more elaborate. Recurrent themes include the difference between sacred and profane love and the nature of chance.

Summary Article: Murdoch, Iris
From Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy

A prolific novelist and philosopher, Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) published 26 novels, three of which won major prizes, three plays, two volumes of poetry, numerous philosophical essays, three philosophical books, and two Platonic dialogues. Her major essays are collected in Existentialists and Mystics (1997) and The Sovereignty of Good (1970). Her first book-length work in philosophy was Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953). She wrote a study of Plato's ideas on art and philosophy in The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists (1977). Her two dialogues are published as Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues (1986). Her magnum opus in philosophy is the massive Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1992). She had been working on a study of Heidegger and was on her 27th novel when she began to suffer from Alzheimer's disease and was unable to complete these works.

Murdoch's contribution to the philosophy of education should be seen in the context of her metaphysical realism. For her, there are truths about the world and about the human condition that education, properly pursued, can illuminate. These truths concern the nature of the human soul or psyche as naturally and relentlessly selfish; our capacity for what she calls “unselfing,” the ability to overcome our selfish nature and see reality truly; and reality as including the nature of the human condition as subject to contingency, chance, and death. For Murdoch, art and intellectual studies are educational because they are especially suited to this task of unselfing by promoting the development of qualities of mind and character she calls virtues. She frequently acknowledged Plato as her inspiration.

Murdoch links education in art and intellectual studies with a pervasive case of unselfing: our untutored appreciation of beauty in nature. Great art links us with this simple sense of beauty, but for Murdoch, most art fails to do so because it is mere self-consoling fantasy: Good triumphs over evil, true love overcomes all obstacles, and the like. Most art presents what she calls false unities, by which she means an illusory sense of completion. Great art breaks this illusion, and Murdoch cites tragedy as especially good at getting things right about the world, especially about the unintelligible fate of an individual person, the suffering of innocents, or the nature of evil. Great art does this because its form presents us with the independent existence of something fine and excellent. The novel also has a key place in education, because it can depict what escapes the grasp of even great art, both the inevitable contingency and awfulness of human life and what she calls its “funniness” and absurdity. Reading and reflecting on novels thus can and should be a moral experience.
The phenomenon of unselfing depends essentially on the qualities of mind and character that both the artist and the consumer of art need: virtues of courage, truthfulness, patience, and humility. Murdoch claims that art is the most educational of all human activities. So to learn to appreciate art is to learn to exercise the virtues.

Murdoch also finds in what she calls technai, by which she means intellectual studies, another source for freeing ourselves from our selfishness and for connecting us with reality. She uses the example of learning a foreign language to explain the sense that the same concepts are at work here as in her discussion of great art. Achieving fluency in another language is to come to learn something that was originally quite alien but whose independent existence must be appreciated. Intellectual studies generally—for example, mathematics, history, the sciences, philosophy—enable us to pierce the veil of the selfish soul by presenting ways in which the world looks behind the appearances that the selfish soul takes for reality.

Murdoch's Platonism is one of the key elements in her understanding of education. She believed that the means to get things right should be taught in schools, and doing so requires that teachers embody the virtues and that students learn to exhibit them in their studies. Virtues, for her, enable us to connect with reality. She also appropriates Plato here to bridge the gap between the good artist or good scientist and the good person. Morality, which for her means the achievement of the fine qualities of attention and truthfulness, which provide a source of energy for right action, is more difficult than art and intellectual studies because human beings are more complicated than paintings, novels, or theories. Her debt to Plato is also evident in her argument that there is a higher good than the good of any of these activities. Even great art and impressive scientific theories must be understood in the context of one's life and one's community. We still have to decide what should be the place of these products and activities in our lives. But that decision, an inescapably moral one, requires the very same virtues that she claims are necessary for the creation and appreciation of great art and for the mastery of intellectual studies.

Murdoch offers an image of human beings that befits both the novelist and the philosopher: Human beings make pictures of themselves and then come to resemble the pictures. The task of education is to develop the virtues so we can evaluate these pictures and distinguish those that merely feed our fantasies from those that connect us with reality.

The central role that the virtues play in Murdoch's philosophy of education links up very naturally with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Oakeshott.

See also Aesthetic Education; MacIntyre, Alasdair; Moral Education; Oakeshott, Michael; Plato; Virtue Ethics

Further Readings


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