

## ***Guest Editors' Preface***

**Riccardo Fanciullacci**

Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia  
Dipartimento di Filosofia e Beni Culturali  
riccardofanciullacci@libero.it

**Maria Silvia Vaccarezza**

Università degli Studi di Genova  
Dipartimento di Antichità, Filosofia e Storia  
ms.vaccarezza@gmail.com

It is difficult to classify the philosophical works of Iris Murdoch (1919-1999). Many labels have been attached to her, such as 'moral realist', 'moral cognitivist', 'virtue theorist', 'promoter of a narrative approach to ethics' and so on; all of them grasp something of her philosophy, but still none of them is really adequate, insofar as each of them is too narrow or somehow misleading. In short, no label succeeds in revealing the secret of such an intense and unique research.

Obviously, it is useful to classify someone's thought by identifying the problems it addresses, the key concepts it develops and makes use of and the traditions operating as its fundamental sources. We could say that this is a necessary condition for that thought to enrich and nourish other researches. From this point of view, Murdoch's singularity can be a limit, a flaw. But the act of labelling, on the other hand, has also a more obscure function; namely, that of removing what is singular, keeping at bay the anxiety it provokes.

When we make a singular philosophical research merely a variation of a standard position we are trying to keep that singularity away. Instead of finding and discovering a way to deal with it, we make use of one of the procedures already at our disposal. Dealing with what is singular without 'regimenting' its singularity is something much more complex and demanding. According to Iris Murdoch, it is the difficult outcome of the path towards virtue. It is the gift of virtue.

While reflecting seriously on the possibility of encountering and dealing with what is singular, it is quite likely that we become anxious: in that encounter it could become necessary for us to transform ourselves, and the very idea of changing in order to better embrace the other can generate distress and anxiety. Human beings – and philosophers make no exception – often prefer to give away a

great deal of themselves and of their desire just to remain in the repetition of the identical, that is, in what Murdoch calls the “*machine*”.<sup>1</sup>

This repetition, indeed, despite the dissatisfaction and the delusion it entails, is nevertheless reassuring, since what happens within it, whether good or bad, is always the same. Labelling things is just one of the several ways by which we make sure, consciously or not, to deal always with variations of the identical. As we have told before, this ritual has a particularly respectable status within philosophy, but it is also a ritual which prevents us from encountering Iris Murdoch’s thought.

That philosophy had absorbed procedures and protocols which prevented it from encountering the elusive obscure and mysterious aspects of life, is something Murdoch very soon understood and openly condemned quite often:

As philosophy is steadily drawn in the direction of logic and becomes increasingly a matter for highly trained experts, it separates itself from, and discourages, the vaguer and more generally comprehensible theorizing which it used to nourish and be nourished by; and the serious student who is either studying philosophy or is influenced by it (and there are many of the latter) develops an almost excessive fear of imprecision. ‘Everything that can be said can be said clearly’. Outside the small area of possible clarity lies the *dangerous* region of ‘mushy’ thinking from which attention is averted. The ideal is a demonstration, however tiny, which is clean, sterile and conclusive.<sup>2</sup>

This process can be explained in several ways. Most explanations see the turning of the search for precise and sharp distinctions into the self-referential practice of solving abstruse puzzles as a kind of *heterogony of ends*: the process conducts to an end which is different from, if not completely opposed to, the one it was aiming for. But it can be the case that the achieved end contains something of what we were obscurely looking for: staying away from what in life is so mysterious to be always “dangerous” as well. Murdoch herself admits that often philosophy, far from being the pure activity imagined by many (and by many philosophers), is one of the practices by which human beings – without revealing it – manage to deal with what frightens them:

It is frequently difficult in philosophy to tell whether one is saying something reasonably public and objective, or whether one is merely erecting a barrier, special to one’s own temperament, against one’s own personal fears.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Cfr. I. MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*, in: EAD., *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by P. Conradi, Penguin Books, New York 1999, p. 364.

2 MURDOCH, *A House of Theory*, in: EAD., *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 174-175 (Our italics).

3 MURDOCH, *On ‘God’ and ‘Good’*, in: EAD., *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 359.

A theoretical puzzle can be difficult, but it can never be *dangerous*, since all the ways to deal with it, putting it aside included, are well known from the beginning. This is not the case with the other's otherness, that is with the evidence that something real and other than us exists. This is why Murdoch claims that understanding otherness is the essence of love<sup>4</sup>, and that love, when so understood, "is practically identical with goodness".<sup>5</sup>

What we want to stress here is that if love is needed to acknowledge the other's reality, a 'loving gaze' is also needed to encounter and appreciate Iris Murdoch's philosophical discourse's singularity. Just as, when we try to understand someone we love, we deal with him/her without taking our frameworks for granted, but willing to open to the new, the same happens with Murdoch's works: we must immerse ourselves in them without haste to forcing their meaning into a formula. Her works offer us a chance to re-define what we are, primarily but not only, as philosophers.

What about critical sense? What happens to it when we are involved in a loving reading? This is a legitimate question. In Murdoch's writings, however, we find a copious use of critical reason, but it is used in a special way. That is, critical reason does not serve the purpose of disguising a duel against a specular image of oneself. We think that Murdoch would have endorsed Robert Nozick's unforgettable words, namely those condemning the practice of philosophy as a duel.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Murdoch's critical observations represent attempts to open a passage in the other thinkers' discourse – such as Richard Hare, Jean-Paul Sartre or, later, Jacques Derrida – through which it can be thinkable what in those discourses has become unutterable and unthinkable. 'Critical sense', therefore, finds its place not as a distinctive position to be promoted in the debate, but as the attention which prevents us from transforming the loving reading into connivance with the author, so to ensure that it continues to measure itself with the truth of experience. If we don't want to miss the encounter with Iris Murdoch, therefore, we have to involve ourselves in a loving listening, and we also need to philosophize *with* her.

Shouldn't this attitude characterize the approach to any philosophical thought? The answer is probably yes, but let us concentrate on the present moment without dissolving its singularity in the sea of the possibilities and virtualities. Now it's Iris Murdoch's moment. This "now" does not refer only to the *hic et nunc* of the present issue of *Ethics & Politics* – the first not devoted to a philosophical question but to a philosopher (*Iris Murdoch: the Reality of Moral Life*). It refers also to a more general situation, namely the increasing interest and

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4 Cfr. MURDOCH, *The Sublime and the Good*, in: EAD., *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 215.

5 MURDOCH, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*, p. 375.

6 Cfr. R. NOZICK, *Philosophical explanations*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981, pp. 1-8.

attention to this thinker, both abroad, where the number of monographs devoted to her thought keeps increasing more and more, and in Italy. As regards Italy, let us mention only two examples of this phenomenon: the International Conference on Iris Murdoch organized by Ester Monteleone at Roma Tre University in February 2014, with the participation of scholars coming from all over the world, and the editorial project carried on by the publisher *Il Saggiatore*, aiming at restarting to publish Iris Murdoch's works. The first steps on this way have been the publication of *The Flight from the Enchanter (L'incantatore)*, which was still unpublished in Italy, and the reprint of *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. In this 'Murdochian moment' we participate as well, by collecting the following essays, all written for this occasion (except for two, which were nevertheless unpublished in Italy) by scholars capable of a loving listening of Murdoch's words and of ability and willingness to philosophize with her.

One of the recurring issues of the papers here collected is that of Murdoch's 'realism', either as the main focus of the essay or as emerging from the background of the other questions at stake. This fact is not surprising, given Murdoch's insistence on the centrality of reality in moral life, but also given the present philosophical temper which, according to the newspapers, is characterized by the shift from the much celebrated "hermeneutic *koiné*" to a new "realistic *koiné*". Although these formulas belong more to the politics of philosophy than to philosophy in itself, they also indicate a question, strictly bound to the idea of reality, philosophy has to deal with. Iris Murdoch can help us dealing with it in a non-schematic way and avoiding to seize it as an opportunity to raise barriers against our unconscious fears. As we have told, for Murdoch one cannot understand moral life without considering the reference to reality: it is false to say that all of the moral life depends on the will, while only science deals with reality. On the contrary, moral life is the most radical and comprehensive form of contact with reality. Within its field no preliminary methodological decision delimitates what counts as real, and therefore also imagination can operate as an authentic modality to access reality. We can see therefore how Murdoch's discourse escapes simplified partitions, such as that of imagination and reality. And it also escapes the abstract opposition between reality and words, since it states that "*Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being*".<sup>7</sup> The reality every human being as a moral agent deals with is obviously something common, but still there are no neutral and commonly acknowledged epistemic procedures to verify it.

Discovering reality becomes itself a moral achievement. Again, Murdoch prevents us from taking refuge in simplified images, like that according to which verifying the facts is only a preliminary step of the moral reasoning, a step we are all naturally and easily capable of accomplishing.

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7 MURDOCH, *Salvation by Words*, in: EAD., *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 241.

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The following papers offer us different perspectives on Murdochian understanding of the reality of moral life, and on the reality of moral life itself. But their difference, their *divergent accord*, far from being a limit, is the best proof that the complexity of moral life, at once disturbing and fertile, has been at least touched upon.