



“Sin, Death, and Moral Growth in Iris Murdoch’s Discussion of Art”

MEREDITH DREES

KANSAS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY



Dame Jean Iris Murdoch

1919-1999

Iris Murdoch's View of 'Original Sin'

- ▶ We are born with selfish tendencies, and we must be freed from our egos.
- ▶ Sin: “The evasion of the idea of death” (MGM 104)
- ▶ Original Sin may be:
 - ▶ “a reasonable generalization about the natural sinfulness of humans”
 - ▶ “used as a fantasizing protection of the ego” that makes “everything we do seem innocent because it is inevitable” (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 103)

“Unselfing”

- ▶ The influence of **Simone Weil**
- ▶ Confronting the idea of death leads to a ‘de-creation of the ego’
- ▶ This realization plays a role in defeating the selfish part of us.
- ▶ Sin also evades the defeat of the ego, and part of sinning just is acting in accordance with egotistic fantasies.

The Fate of Lucifer

- ▶ A prideful defiance of God, a self-focused desire for power
- ▶ His fate was eternal suffering, not death
- ▶ The eternally suffering Lucifer was used “to transform the idea of death into the idea of suffering,” which led to a “taming and beautifying of the idea of death” (SOG 6 & 81).

The neo-Kantian Lucifer

- ▶ This Lucifer symbolizes an eternally fallen – but not dead – pride in the human power of reason.
- ▶ This prideful focus on suffering and the ego leads to a mistaken view of original sin, and, hence, an excuse for being immoral.
- ▶ Murdoch argues that this issue can be addressed through a careful interpretation of the art of tragedy.

The Proper Study of Philosophers



- ▶ Murdoch references Socrates' claim in the *Phaedo* (64a) that philosophy is the art of dying. She argues that:
“Philosophy is a training for death, when the soul will exit the body. It attempts by argument and the meticulous pursuit for truth to detach the soul from material and egotistic goals and to enliven its spiritual faculty which is intelligent and akin to the good” (*The Fire and The Sun*, 21).

Tragedy

- ▶ Tragedy is “the form of art where the exercise of love is most like its exercise in morals...art after all is consolation and delight, although really great art gives us a mixed an somber delight which is akin to our recognition of morality” (“The Sublime and The Good,” 55).

Suffering without Thrill and Death Without Consolation

- ▶ Murdoch argues that aesthetic experiences differ from moral experiences especially because they are enjoyable.
- ▶ Part of morality just is to admit the existence of suffering and the contingency of life.
- ▶ Being moral does not guarantee happiness.
- ▶ Life is not what we fantasize about it being.

Tragedy: The solution to the death/suffering problem

- ▶ Tragedy resists comfort
- ▶ It is a “broken whole,” and it must “break the ego”
- ▶ Death must be represented in art because it threatens the ego’s dream of eternal life and happiness and power.

The Reality of Others

- ▶ Tragedy, in its defeat of the ego, allows us to focus on something new: Other individuals in all of their particularity.

Bibliography

- Murdoch, Iris. *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, (NY: Penguin Books, 1993)
- _____, "Against Dryness." *The Encounter*, (1961)
- _____, "Ethics and the Imagination." *The Irish Theological Quarterly*
- _____, *The Fire and the Sun*. (Clarendon Press, 1977)
- _____, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971)
- _____, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited." *The Yale Review* (1959)
- _____, "The Sublime and the Good." *Chicago Review*. vol. 13, No. 3 (1959)
- Nehamas, Alexander. *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007)
- Plato, *Complete Works*. Trans. Grube, G.M.A. and rev. C.D.C. Reeve, (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997)
- Weil, Simone. "Human Personality," *Selected Essays*, ed. Richard Rees (1957)
- _____, *Waiting for God*. (HarperCollins Publishers, 2009)