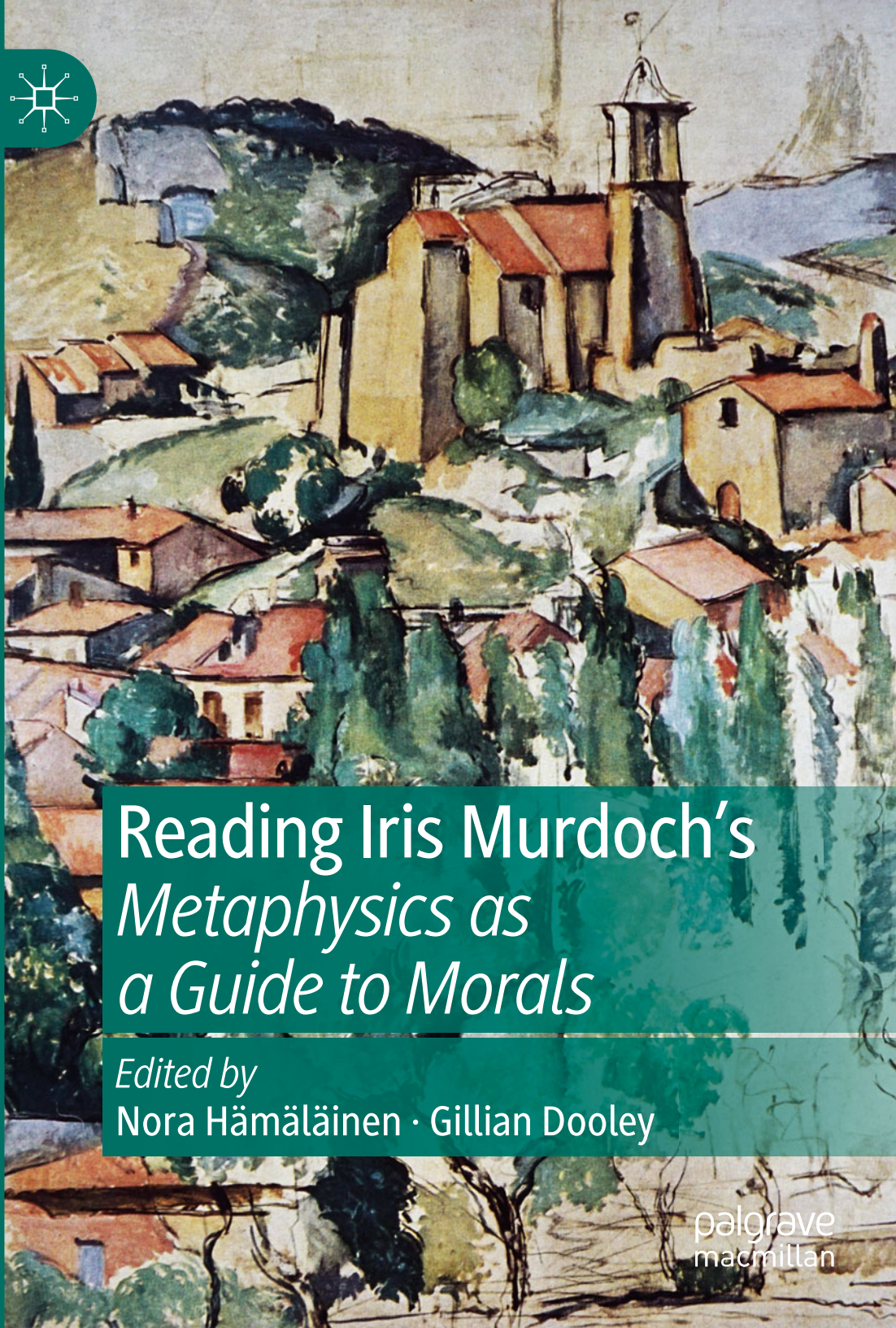

Reading Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

Edited by

Nora Hämäläinen · Gillian Dooley

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To the memory of Kate Larson 1961–2018

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CHAPTER 1

Reading *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: An Introduction

Nora Hämäläinen and Gillian Dooley

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (hereafter *MGM*) was Iris Murdoch's major philosophical testament and a highly original and ambitious attempt to talk about our time. Based on her Gifford Lectures in 1982, it was reworked over a ten-year period before its publication in 1992. Her manuscripts as well as her correspondence from the period attest that this was not an altogether easy process, as Frances White reveals in the second chapter of this book. Her ambition was to do serious philosophical work, and yet to speak in a way accessible to the ordinary educated person about the cultural and moral predicament of largely liberal modernity: perhaps a nearly impossible task in the academic and compartmentalised context of late twentieth-century anglophone philosophy.

It is perhaps precisely the broader ambition that gives *MGM* lasting philosophical relevance and opens up dimensions as yet unexplored. Murdoch's earlier work resonates with contemporary turns in ethics towards 'vision' rather than 'choice', to virtues, to love and other

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emotions, to the relevance of literature and art for morality. These themes are also present, and further developed, in *MGM*, but are complemented by a profound exploration of our condition as spiritual creatures in a secular world and as creatures who cannot avoid holding metaphysical views even in a post-metaphysical age. The book makes distinctive contributions to questions of ethics, the possibility of metaphysics in the contemporary world, spiritual life without god, the nature and relevance of philosophy, questions of style and sensibility in intellectual work, and the nature of evil in a secular world, among other things.

Many of these topics in Murdoch's work have been discussed by scholars in the past 20 years, but the influence of *MGM* has been significantly smaller than that of her previous work, partly because many readers find the book difficult and messy. The nature of the difficulty is, however, hard to pin down. It has something to do with the scarcity of metatextual instructions for reading, and the unfinished and circling character of many of the chapters of the book. But it also has to do with the ways in which her take on its different subject matters, and indeed on philosophy overall, differs from what most readers expect her to deliver.

Stanley Cavell (1981, 10) notes that in some cases you must 'let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it'. *MGM* is undoubtedly one of these works.

Though well received by theologians, who appreciate her sustained engagement with the question of faith in secular modernity, *MGM* has not been a great favourite among Murdoch's large readership of literary scholars and writers. The slighting attitude to the book sometimes gets what to a philosophical reader looks like a comic twist, as when Andrew Wilson, in his keynote talk at an Iris Murdoch conference at Chichester in 2017, aired the suspicion that the effort of writing of the book 'broke' Murdoch, that is, prevented her from developing as a literary writer in her last years; as if it were indeed obvious that more or stronger novels would have been preferable to *MGM*. Part of the difficulty is related to the form: chapters do not always open up as systematic arguments. But this should perhaps bother the philosophers more than the literary scholars; the latter's problems may rather be due to the difficulty of getting a good grasp of what she is up to, a difficulty they certainly share with many philosophical readers too. This is where the present volume comes in, offering paths through different topics and chapters in the book, in thoughtful company.

In this introductory essay we attend to a few themes that we believe will be useful for readers of *MGM* and this book: some central topics of *MGM*, the formal and textual aspects of her writing, and the continuing relevance of the book for contemporary philosophy as well as humanist and social scientific thought more widely. At the end, we provide a short tour through the essays included here.

Philosophical Ambitions

Murdoch's philosophical ambition in the book is nothing less than a comprehensive view of the human situation at the time of writing: a historical situation of gains and losses, distinctive matters of concern, things we can 'no longer believe in', things we take for granted, fundamental commitments, inspirational images, and root metaphors.

It shows deep commitment to the idea, shared by younger contemporaries like Charles Taylor, that a deep and complex, historically aware understanding of our present is a prerequisite for an intelligent normative conception of our moral lives. As she puts it at the end of *MGM*: 'We live in the present, this strange familiar yet mysterious continuum which is so difficult to describe. This is what is nearest and it matters what kind of place it is' (*MGM*, 495).

It matters, indeed, in more than one way. It does so for us as people: for our lives, for how the world of our present opens up for us, what it allows us to do or be, what options it gives for us in practical, moral, existential and spiritual terms. But it also matters for us as philosophers, scholars, social scientists, and theologians who try to get a more objective view of some contemporary phenomenon. In these capacities our challenge is double: to inhabit our present and yet also understand it as well as we can, *in medias res*, without the cooling benefit of hindsight.

In a letter to the French author Raymond Queneau in 1947 Murdoch writes, 'the question is, can I really exploit the *advantages* (instead of as hitherto simply suffer from the disadvantages) of having a mind on the borders of philosophy, literature and politics' (Horner and Rowe 2015, 99). The advantages of this mind lie in its capacity to read her own present, and the multiple pasts embedded in that present, without reducing experience to its historicity.

In the introductory chapter to *MGM* she talks about our thinking taking place against a horizon that goes back to the Greeks (or so we are taught), and about the claims made '(for instance by Nietzsche,

Heidegger and Derrida)' (*MGM*, 2) that this horizon has been sponged away. She does not quite buy the common story of a modern, disenchanted world, devoid of metaphysics. But she doesn't have a ready alternative account either: *MGM* is framed as an investigation of this situation.

Sometimes art is better and quicker than philosophy at picking up what is happening to us. As she puts it in the oft-cited interview with Bryan Magee: 'Our consciousness changes, and the change may appear in art before it receives its commentary in a theory, though the theory may also subsequently affect the art' (Murdoch 1997, 22). In *MGM* both literature and visual arts have a continuous strong presence in a variety of roles: as objects of contemplation, as sources of insight, sites of existential and phenomenological discovery, as clues to the historical formation of our conceptions of ourselves and our world.

What is also useful for a reader to appreciate, is how Murdoch's literary sensibility is at work in the book. It is not so much a matter of the 'literariness' of the text itself, but of her style of handling her plural subject matters. While writing something well recognisable as somewhat essayistic philosophical prose, she reads her present as a novelist, seeking out moods, modalities, metaphors and complexities. She is taking the pulse of her present as much as making claims about it. This exploratory emphasis may also be seen as a key to what is interestingly 'political' in her thought: not her normative political views (which changed over the course of her life), nor any normative political theory (she did not present one), but her critical interest in, and ways of looking at the interplay of worldviews, mythologies, forms of personhood, moralities and societal visions, in philosophy, art and society at large.

Religion

In his essay 'Iris Murdoch and moral philosophy', Taylor describes two transfers in Murdoch's philosophy: 'We were trapped in the corral of morality. Murdoch led us out not only to the broad fields of ethics but also beyond that again to the almost untracked forests of the unconditional' (Taylor 1996, 5).

Answering to a latent need in late twentieth-century anglophone moral philosophy, the move from the corral to the field, from morality (action and obligation) to ethics (the good life) has absorbed a large part of the philosophers' attention to Murdoch. Connecting the narrower

issues of what we owe to each other to the Socratic question of 'how one ought to live', to what we find or should find worthy, important or beautiful; to the inflections of moral personhood, and so on, she served as an inspiration for thinkers like Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Raimond Gaita, and their students and followers, as well as for the boom of philosophical Murdoch scholarship in the twenty-first century.

The path to the forests of the unconditional, though central for *MGM*, has for the philosophers been less interesting, partly due to the secular tonality of contemporary philosophy and the lack of a relevant frame in which to place her thought on these issues. Though they are as convinced as Murdoch of the idea that 'God does not and cannot exist', they have been less concerned than she was with the spiritual needs and propensities of their contemporaries. For theologians like Hauerwas, Schweiker and Antonaccio the further move seems to be at the centre of their interest in Murdoch. Taylor thinks that she is genuinely out in the wilderness:

> The forest is virtually untracked. Or rather, there are old tracks; they appear on maps that have been handed down to us. But when you get in there, it is very hard to find them. So we need people to make new trails. That is, in effect what Iris Murdoch has done. (Taylor 1996, 18)

He points out two things that he finds particularly useful in Murdoch's contribution. The first is the way she addresses the shift from a theistic world to one where what we used to refer to as God appears lost or difficult to access. What she shows above all, is that 'the forest' is still there, and that we can and sometimes perhaps must enter it.

The other point has to do with plurality. 'Even in so-called ages of faith', people find different articulations of the higher useful, appealing and true. Especially those who have a strong calling to the spiritual life, are likely to make their own ways. This plurality, and the unity in or behind it, are central for Murdoch's engagement with 'the forest' (Taylor 1996, 19).

Faced with the spiritual flatness of modern secular moral and existential thought Murdoch insists that 'we need a theology which can continue without God' (*MGM*, 511). Stanley Hauerwas has expressed the belief that 'she wants to replace Christianity because she has a better alternative' (Hauerwas 1996, 196), a watered-down Buddhist

Christianity of some sort, based on a rejection of the dogmatic dimensions of the latter. But this may not quite capture the seriousness of her sense that God has slipped out of our world: it is not as if she could choose some form of 'ordinary' Christianity instead. In the face of what she sees as an impossibility of doctrinal faith, she searches out the Christian tradition, along with other forms of spiritual thought and experience. Not only have good and evil, *pace* Nietzsche, survived secularisation. Also, the concept of sin, prayer, the humility of selfless attention, and the affirmation of something higher in the ontological proof can, she believes, be retained, to enrich our understanding of ourselves as moral beings.

The effect of her ventures into the forest is not one of making ethics more absolute and categorical, but rather one of making it more complicated, giving it more psychological depth and social and historical resonances. In the midst of these, she develops the picture of the human being as directed toward a unifying idea of the Good.

This does not, however, quite amount to anything we would necessarily want to call a secular theology. Her thinking about the human being's striving for the Good is also helpfully read in a context of modern thought on perfectionist cultivation of the self and of philosophy as a transformative practice, as we find it in the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Hadot, Alexander Nehamas, and Stanley Cavell among others.[1]

Metaphysics

The issue of metaphysics in *MGM* is far from exhausted by Murdoch's concern for the role of religion. The questions of God and the transcendent are surely a part of it, because how we deal with them has crucial implications for what we understand the world to be fundamentally like; what kinds of things we take to be real, and what kinds of things, correlatively, unreal; what we consider fundamental and derivative; what can be 'true' and what cannot, etc. But there is more.

Murdoch's big question about metaphysics and morals, at work from her early essays to *MGM*, is how our conceptions of 'the real' affect our moral orientation, and vice versa. Metaphysics thus does not enter with the concerns for a transcendent good. All thinking, even in a disenchanted world, and even in twentieth-century anti-metaphysical philosophy, rests on metaphysical assumptions. A naturalist metaphysics is a metaphysics too. Although such metaphysics, and a worldview based

on it, has been widely considered morally neutral, it has moral and other evaluative commitments built in from the start. It is also, like any metaphysical view, contingent and arbitrary in relation to the experienced reality it conditions. It is far from the only way of making sense of a world where secular morality and natural science define much of our understanding of what there is.

Moreover, it is perhaps not even a good description the world in which most of us live. Like the 'modern settlement' that Bruno Latour (1993) talks about, which wrongly postulates an impermeable wall between nature and culture, the naturalist metaphysics which excludes the good as something real is in Murdoch's view based on a misunderstanding of 'where we are'. Latour seeks to show that we have never lived according to this modern settlement. Murdoch insists that the good, as something absolute, is very much a real part of the lived reality of ordinary people (*MGM*, 412), and that they are not mistaken in holding this view.

Heeding the central role of Kant for Murdoch in *MGM*, one might be led to think of her as concerned with universal conditions of possibility for human morality and knowledge. This is the interpretive line taken by Antonaccio (2000) in her pioneering work, and many others have, until recently, followed her cue.

We suggest a reading of *MGM* more in line with R.G. Collingwood's suggestion in *An essay on metaphysics*: 'Metaphysics has always been a historical science; but metaphysicians have not always been fully aware of the fact'. The 'absolute presuppositions' that metaphysical questions deal with are by necessity historical ones: what people in given times and places have taken for granted, relied on, in their understanding of the world (Collingwood 1998, 58, 60). Twentieth-century philosophers have in his view scorned metaphysics because they have mistaken it for something else: the postulation of universal structures. The metaphysics he considers fit for his time is a descriptive metaphysics or a metaphysics of experience, an inquiry into historically specific absolute presuppositions; our own or someone else's. This kind of descriptive work is also the core of the metaphysics of *MGM*.

Like Michel Foucault, as he lays it out in his 1984 essay 'What is enlightenment?', Murdoch is thus more concerned with historical *a prioris* than with allegedly universal ones. As observed by Gary Browning, 'Throughout her works, she engages with the historicity of the present and reflects upon the past from which it has emerged' (Browning 2018, 2).

The forms of our thought; its images, tensions, connections and lacunae, questions and answers, are all subject to time.

But the descriptive story is certainly not the whole story in Murdoch's case. She finds philosophy necessarily involved in both a descriptive and, in a broad sense, a normative endeavour. It does not only describe what is: through its choices of words and emphases, it makes positive suggestions as to how we could or perhaps should see things.

Murdoch's descriptive work in metaphysics is thus combined, not quite with a normative, but with a self-consciously constructive metaphysical effort. For her, this is not a matter of formulating a metaphysical system (she certainly thinks that kind of metaphysics is impossible for the modern thinker), but of giving an affirmative account of the human being as irreducibly placed between good and evil, striving for the good. This constructive metaphysics is to be seen as fundamentally and necessarily premised on a robust descriptive understanding of where we stand metaphysically, morally, existentially and epistemically. There is no point in postulating a God if we no longer can believe in him. But the world we can see—that makes sense to us—offers different, often metaphorical, options of articulation, and we need to work with these.

Both the descriptive and the constructive metaphysics is for Murdoch a thoroughly pictorial business: of discovering the metaphysical images we live by and making use of images that carry our understanding forward in helpful ways.

Many of Murdoch's engagements with other philosophers reflect this concern for the pictorial aspects of both philosophy and 'vernacular' thinking. Five of the 18 chapters of *MGM* are explicitly built around particular philosophers (in one case a pair) and many of those which do not, still have a particular philosopher's contribution as their central material. Her readings are engaged, personal and often troubled, much concerned with the directions and tendencies of the philosophers' pictorial and metaphorical thinking. There is her familiar suspicion that Wittgenstein, in spite of himself, is hostile to the 'inner life'; the idea that Derrida is locked in a cage of language; the warmth and stickiness of Buber's I-Thou. A familiar experience, expressed for example by Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen and Christopher Cordner in their essays, is that her readings can be unfair or off key, and yet, at the same time, interesting in how they pick up a tendency, a colouring, that is indeed there.

Borrowing from Frances White, who in her essay talks about Murdoch's 'subliminal language', meaning her casual but revelatory

use of expressions such as 'of course', it might be helpful to think about Murdoch as, in many cases, a subliminal reader, reading only partly for argument, and as much for spirit, direction, mood, underlying beliefs and tendencies. This is another dimension of the literary sensibility we talked about before: at work in reading her contemporaries and predecessors as well as her present.

Textual Features

The epigraph of *MGM* is from Paul Valéry, poet and intellectual: 'Une difficulté est une lumière. Une difficulté insurmontable est un soleil'. Confronting difficulty is thus Murdoch's abiding preoccupation in this work, and the nexus between difficulty and illumination is posed as central metaphor. She later, in the chapter on the Ontological Proof, glosses Valéry's image: 'Valéry speaks of the sunlight which rewards him who steadily contemplates the insuperable difficulty. What is awaited is an illuminating experience, a *presence*: a case of human consciousness at its most highly textured' (*MGM*, 419). The context here is a discussion of prayer, and of 'the artist who, rejecting easy false mediocre forms and hoping for the right thing, the best thing, *waits*', and of the broader application of this to 'work and human relations' (*MGM*, 418–419). The paradox inherent in the Valéry image, combining the ideas of insurmountability and illumination, seems to be resolved in Murdoch's formulation of a 'reward' for steady contemplation.

But one might also imagine that Valéry, writing in France in 1942, had in mind something less comforting: the light cast by unbearable and intractable circumstances which could be as much a torment as a reward. Pickering describes his approach:

> A slippery, eminently refractory discourse replaces time-honoured literary devices and genres. In their place Valéry proposes a view of the literary work as a field for experimentation and potentialization, the dwelling-place of the mind as it constantly strains towards the limits of its capacity. (Pickering 1988, 51)

Although Valéry's circumstances when writing *Mauvaises pensées* under the Vichy regime differed markedly from Murdoch's life in Oxford half a century later, and his epigrammatic, hard-edged style is quite different from hers, there is something in her method that echoes his, as Pickering

describes it. While Murdoch's contemplation of the manifold difficulties of her subject in *MGM* is typically characterised by patience rather than torment, and could hardly be called 'slippery', the usual conventions of discursive writing—introductions, conclusions, topic sentences—without being totally absent, are de-emphasised. Her approach and style tend to be calm and undramatic, one substantial sentence following the last, forming solid paragraphs, rarely less than half a page long and usually considerably longer. Long quotations are inserted with the briefest of introductions, if any. Many of these features of *MGM* would be challenged by contemporary editors, who insist that authors shape their work for maximum readability.

However, in *MGM* the patient reader needs to look not for the excitements of a virtuosic or shapely prose style, but to appreciate the steady progress of an intelligent mind confronting difficult material, following the myriad pathways laid down by her predecessors and putting them into conversation with each other, allowing their difficulties to light her way forward through the maze: 'a mind straining towards the limits of its capacity', as Pickering writes. Instructively, Murdoch writes that

> Wittgenstein accuses Schopenhauer of evading what is 'deep'. Schopenhauer may thus 'give up', but he recognises his obstacle, rushes off at a tangent, tries to wander round it, talks, even chats, about it, and can instruct us in this way too. (An insuperable difficulty may or may not be a sun, but it gives some light.) (*MGM*, 251)

This passage appears well into in Chapter 8, the second on 'Consciousness and thought', and within a few pages Murdoch has referred not only to Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein and (obliquely) to Valéry, but to Plato, Arthur Koestler, Rilke, Simone Weil, Berkeley, Hume, Derrida, Zen Buddhism and more, bringing all these diverse thinkers and ways of thinking into dialogue with each other. Perhaps Wittgenstein would disapprove of her methodology too. But the attractions and virtues of *MGM* are inseparable from its questing, exploratory, conversational style, which insists only on the importance of trusting that which can be precarious, illusory and insurmountably difficult.

It is significant that this Valéry phrase is also quoted towards the end of Murdoch's 1987 novel *The Book and the Brotherhood*, when Gerard Hernshaw is contemplating 'the book that he had to write' in response to the book of the title, the work published by the sinister Marxist David

Crimond (Murdoch 1987, 574). Several contributors to this volume (White, Tomkinson, Browning) discuss the links between *MGM* and *The Book and the Brotherhood*, which Murdoch was working on concurrently. Gerard thinks,

> Well, more often no doubt an insuperable difficulty is an insuperable difficulty. … Perhaps indeed all that awaited him was a long and final failure, a dreary fruitless toil, wasting his energy and his remaining time to produce something that was worthless. (Murdoch 1987, 575)

It is indeed difficult to avoid making the link between the book Gerard is contemplating, and the book Murdoch was writing. Gerard, although a fictional character embedded in a narrative situation, is engaged here in very much the same kind of debate which is often staged in *MGM*: 'Yes, I'll attempt the book, but it's a life sentence, and not only may it be no good, but I may never know whether it is or not' (Murdoch 1987, 584). It is clear from external sources that she approached the task in a similarly dogged and determined fashion: in May 1986, she wrote to her friend the Marxist philosopher Brian Medlin that she was 'writing some philosophy which may be hopelessly bad' (Dooley and Nerlich 2014, 7). Medlin, though he inevitably disagreed with much that she wrote, found *MGM* 'a marvellously exciting book' (Dooley and Nerlich 2014, 183), and its subsequent readers, while often expressing similar reservations, share his excitement and admiration.

MGM for the Next Century?

Among philosophers and philosophically oriented scholars who have written about Murdoch in the past few decades, there has been a strong consensus about the contemporary import and freshness of her work. When engaging her 1950s critique of modern anglophone moral philosophy, many have felt that what she says is in many ways as relevant for philosophy in the early twenty-first century. In spite of the emergence of virtue ethics and moral psychology, for which her friends Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe have been key figures; notwithstanding the renewed interest the interface between moral philosophy and literature; regardless of Murdoch's complex influence on the following generation, especially through *The sovereignty of good*, these philosophers have found themselves struggling against a moral philosophy too narrowly

oriented to action, choice, rationality and overt principles. In this struggle Murdoch has been a most insightful ally and will most likely continue to be so.

But how about *MGM*? It is far less clear that her thinking in this late work has been or will be put to work for critical reconsiderations of moral philosophy. A closer look at its different topics and engagements will, in any case, place us in a better position to assess its affordances.

On the theme of religion our contemporaries are likely to find her both wrong and right. The 'impossibility' of theistic religion that seemed given in a setting of late twentieth-century European modernity, among Oxbridge dons and London intellectuals, may not appear quite as convincing any more. With a growing presence of Islam in the west; with a continued societal impact of Christian movements in America as well as in Europe; and with a deeper understanding of the plural faces of modernity in different parts of the world, we might have reason to think that modernity is after all not secular in the sense envisioned by Murdoch. People, also in our time, can believe many things, and make sense of the world in quite different ways.

The ambitious effort to speak about a whole 'age' in a single book is a hazardous one, always risking insipid simplification. Isaiah Berlin (2013), drawing on a Greek proverb from the poet Archilochus, makes the distinction between intellectual foxes (who know many small things) and hedgehogs (who know one big thing). Murdoch, in *MGM* more than ever, is very much a fox who likes dressing up as hedgehog, enjoying thus the benefits of both temperaments. This is never clearer than in *MGM* and makes the book more durable than any well-rounded, definite account of 'her times' would be.

The purpose of this volume is to invite old and new readers to follow her tracks. It is scholarly in the sense that it gathers researchers who are well conversant with her work and asks them to engage seriously with her text. But it is not a collection of regular research papers. To achieve its diplomatic mission of making *MGM* more easily approachable, we have given it a quite particular design. The book consists of chapters where different authors do relatively close readings of different chapters, themes or sets of chapters in *MGM*. Some of the book's central themes are easily approached by attention to individual chapters of *MGM*, while other themes, such as her interest in education and in Plato's Timaeus, are scattered throughout *MGM*. Thus, we have made room for chapters on individual chapters of *MGM* as well as on larger

themes, complemented by chapters which attend to Murdoch's overall style. The chapters are written for a broad audience of scholars, students and intellectuals with an interest in Murdoch's work, including philosophers, theologians, literary scholars and social scientists.

In Chapter 2, Frances White traces the beginnings of *MGM* a decade earlier in the 1982 Edinburgh-based Gifford lecture series on Natural Theology. White also makes visible the rhetorical effect of expressions in Murdoch's prose style that are so characteristic and common as to be hidden in plain sight. These unconscious verbal habits reveal aspects of Murdoch's beliefs and her relationship both with her readers and with her subject matter.

Niklas Forsberg then continues with a discussion of the first chapter of *MGM*, elucidating how the for many readers puzzling opening of the book introduces its central topic: conceptions of unity and disunity in philosophy, art and life. Murdoch is here fuelled by the sense that philosophers often fail to understand the proper roles of unity and disunity in thinking, and that a better grasp, with important theoretical and metaphysical implications, can be obtained by looking at these themes in a broader perspective.

Chapter 4 also concerns Murdoch's first chapter on 'Conceptions of unity. Art'. Fiona Tomkinson draws connections between Murdoch's idea of the unity of the work of art in this chapter and her discussion of Japanese aesthetics and the thought of Katsuki Sekida in Chapter 8, 'Consciousness and thought II'.

Craig Taylor, in Chapter 5, tackles one of the most insuperable difficulties in Murdoch's work, one which she concentrates on in her second chapter, 'Fact and Value'. He explores how Murdoch, while dismissive of the philosophical tendency to exclude value from the natural world, also sees a more interesting and laudable motif in some philosophers' insistence on separating fact and value: the desire to keep value pure and untainted by contingent facts.

The next two chapters both concern Schopenhauer. First, Mariëtte Willemsen looks at Murdoch's sometimes apparently contradictory view of Schopenhauer's philosophy, concluding that she finds a way of reconciling his empiricism with his mysticism. Gillian Dooley then takes a literary approach to *MGM*, following on from Frances White's chapter by looking at the rhetorical features of Murdoch's prose and her depiction of philosophers as characters, in particular how her stylistic sympathy with Schopenhauer affects her reading of his work.

David Fine continues the focus on literature with a discussion of chapters 6 and 8, 'Consciousness and Thought' I and II, and chapter 7, 'Derrida and structuralism'. He discusses Murdoch's uneasy relationship with Derrida and her ideas about the nature and importance of literary criticism, connecting her work to the present day post-critical trend in literary studies.

In Chapter 9, Megan Laverty brings to the fore the many ways in which, without being the explicit subject of a chapter in *MGM*, Murdoch's concern with education permeates her philosophy, in her discussions of other philosophers as well as her moral vision for a life of continuous truth-seeking.

In Chapter 10, Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen tackles one of Murdoch's most important philosophical relationships, that with Wittgenstein, as it is expounded in Chapter 9 of *MGM*. She argues that Murdoch's misunderstanding of some aspects of Wittgenstein's approach to the inner life led to an ambivalent attitude which prevented her from realising certain similarities in their thinking.

Hannah Marije Altorf then looks at a central concern of Murdoch's philosophy: the importance of imagination, which appears as the subject of Chapter 11 of *MGM*. Altorf also considers formal aspects of the book and how they affect the reader's approach, placing the idea of imagination (and its troubling companion, fantasy) in the broader context of Murdoch's thought.

In Chapter 12, Gary Browning takes up the question of Murdoch as a political thinker, as she comes to the fore in Chapter 12 of *MGM*, 'Morals and politics'. He investigates her distinction between a perfectionist morality for the private sphere, and an anti-utopian morality for the public sphere, focused on practical negotiations and the protection of individual rights. Browning also looks beyond *MGM* to Murdoch's novels, such as *The Book and the Brotherhood*, to confirm his reading.

Andrew Gleeson's chapter concentrates on *MGM* Chapter 13, 'The ontological proof', a controversial and difficult philosophical topic that has occasioned much discussion over the centuries. Gleeson shows how Murdoch reinterprets the 'proof' for the purposes of secular morality but criticises her for representing moral goodness (in analogy with God) as unnecessarily distant and intangible.

Chapter 14 is concerned with *MGM* Chapter 15, 'Martin Buber and God'. In his discussion of Murdoch's disagreements with Buber's

religious thought, Christopher Cordner includes a detailed consideration of Murdoch's pervasive and pivotal metaphor of vision and her defence of this imagery against Buber's preference for that of 'encounter and dialogue'.

In the next chapter, David Robjant critiques Murdoch's interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus* as it appears throughout *MGM* as well as in earlier philosophical works. He sees two contradictory strands in her discussion, one arising from an argument with Gilbert Ryle about the theory of forms, and the other an allegory of the demiurge as artist.

Mark Hopwood then takes on one of the shortest chapters in *MGM*, 'Axioms, duties and Eros'. He disputes the interpretation of many commentators who see Murdoch as a prescriptive moralist, arguing instead that she is primarily concerned with describing the nature of morality. This chapter underlines Murdoch's commitment to plural vocabularies for conceptualising our moral lives.

Finally, in Chapter 17, Nora Hämäläinen looks into the Void, another very short chapter which follows on from the discussion of axioms, duties and Eros in Chapter 17 of *MGM*. In this chapter, Murdoch confronts the darkest aspects of human experience. Hämäläinen shows how Simone Weil acts as her guide in this grim territory, and discusses the implications of the contrast between their worldviews, one secular and one religious.

This collection of themes reflects the interest of a specific group of writers and some special concerns of the editors. Many good chapters of *MGM* are here left without treatments of their own, and many overarching or dispersed topics of the book are left for future exploration. If anything, we hope that the reading of this book can inspire further writing and new dialogues with Murdoch's late work.

One text in particular is missing here: it was to be called 'The inverted sublime' and to take its cue from chapters 4, 'Comic and tragic' and 11, 'Imagination'. The Swedish novelist, philosopher and passionate Murdochian Kate Larson (b. 1961) who was about to write it died, much too young, in June 2018. We dedicate this book to her memory.

Note

1. For a discussion on Murdoch, Hadot, and Foucault, see Antonaccio (2012), for discussion of Murdoch and Cavell, see Forsberg (2017).

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CHAPTER 2

The Gifford-Driven Genesis and Subliminal Stylistic Construction of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

Frances White

From the Gifford Lectures to *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

Iris Murdoch's journal entry for 25 June 1978 reads flatly, 'Asked to give Gifford Lectures. Rain' (Murdoch Journals, KUAS202/1/13). One would think she would be thrilled to be in the illustrious company of Gabriel Marcel, who, she noted in a letter to Hal Lidderdale in late Spring 1948, 'is to give the Gifford Lectures' (Horner and Rowe 2015, 109), and of her own mentor Donald MacKinnon. But her journals and letters show no delight. Quite the reverse. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Murdoch and the Gifford Lectureship did not get on. An uneasy relationship is evident on both sides. The ordeal was worsened for her by being postponed from Spring 1982 to late autumn because John Bayley broke his ankle and she would not leave him. To Philippa Foot on 20th April 1982 she wrote: 'As to those Giffords I am very pessimistic, and also *pressed* about the whole thing. If it hadn't been for John's mishap,

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