

Sabina Lovibond

Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy.

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It is a commonplace that there is more to avoiding the likes of racism or sexism than sincerely endorsing beliefs to the contrary. A person may sincerely disavow the proposition that women are intellectually inferior yet operate as if this proposition were true. We can be reflective egalitarians and visceral sexists at the same time and, because our sexism remains largely unconscious, we can persist in that condition over time.

In *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, Sabina Lovibond argues that Murdoch was just such a person and that we can learn something about this kind of double-mindedness by studying her novels and philosophy. In particular, Lovibond thinks Murdoch can throw light on why philosophy remains inhospitable to women despite the unfashionability of sexist views within the profession. Lovibond recognizes that Murdoch publicly and privately affirmed women's intellectual abilities and does not doubt her sincerity; her claim is that Murdoch was unable to free herself from certain imaginative motifs that belied her conviction on this point, and inevitably weakened its purchase. The promise of the book is to lay bare the unconscious operations that drove Murdoch to *envisage* women as unfit for philosophy, even as she disavowed this view, and that might hold a key to the difficulties women continue to face feeling at home in philosophy.

Lovibond's first task is to establish that Murdoch is a visceral sexist, someone who exhibits 'deep-seated resistance to the prospect of full moral and intellectual autonomy for women,' notwithstanding her statements to the contrary (7). To this end (borrowing a phrase from Michèle Le Doeuff), Lovibond sees herself as doing "psychoanalysis in a loose sense of the term," with Murdoch's philosophical writings and novels as the principal material (8, 16). Her second task is to offer an explanation of Murdoch's alleged pathology in which we can recognize ourselves; in other words, it is to show that Murdoch's unconscious is also, to an extent, our unconscious. Most of the book (chapters 1-3) is devoted to the first task while the fourth and final chapter seeks to draw the wider lesson.

Lovibond has at best limited success in making the case for Murdoch as a visceral sexist and her extrapolation from Murdoch's mental life to the collective unconscious is woefully underdeveloped. In all, notwithstanding Lovibond's stated intentions, the book reads more like a gratuitous attack on Murdoch than an exercise in understanding how sexism operates in worlds where it is officially unwelcome.

The longest chapter of the book, and probably the most successful, is the discussion of the novels in chapter three. Lovibond covers eight novels in all, starting with *Under the Net* (1954) and ending with *The Message to the Planet* (1989). As I am not a devotee of Murdoch's novels, of which there are some twenty-six, I cannot be sure how representative a sampling this

is or how judicious Lovibond's readings are. That said, Lovibond makes a clear case for the idea that there is a recurrence of certain patterns in the works that invite us to see women as intellectually feeble: the figure of a charismatic master-thinker who is male; the portrayal of intelligent women as 'outsiders' to academe or any kind of intellectual society even when this requires the postulation of highly unrealistic scenarios or details in otherwise realistic novels; and an ambivalent portrayal of feminists and the impact of feminism. Lovibond sees the prevalence of these patterns as contributing to the absence within the novels of women who are intelligent as well as flourishing. More importantly, she sees the patterns (and the fictional worlds they help to sustain) as making it difficult for *the reader* of the novels to imagine women thriving as intellectuals, and particularly as philosophers. As Lovibond sees it, the novels reward us for taking a conventionally dim view of women, much the way a sexist joke might; they offer us a more pleasant reading experience when we give in to such attitudes instead of fighting them. Lovibond amasses details that make a good prima facie case for this charge and for her wider concern about the novels. On the other hand, she fails to note that this is the kind of concern in which Murdoch herself took a lively interest. Moreover, her treatment of Murdoch's and Weil's philosophical writings in Chapters One and Two makes one wonder if she is capable of a judicious reading of any of their works.

These opening chapters aim to show, respectively, that Murdoch's philosophy leads to a sexist politics despite containing nothing explicitly misogynistic and that Murdoch was assisted in this connection by Simone Weil. Lovibond approaches this task by applying a kind of checklist of items designed to reveal whether a moral theory is in league with a benighted sexual politics. For Lovibond, pernicious items include: respect for religion, individualism (versus collectivism), and Platonism (versus materialism). The problem with this approach is that *any* of these items *could* form part of a feminist-friendly theory depending on how that item or position is developed in the theory in question. But Lovibond does not allow as much. This results in facile readings of the exceedingly rich and difficult bodies of philosophical work by Murdoch and Weil. I'll give an extended example since the problem pervades her account.

A principal ethical concept for Murdoch, as for Weil, is 'attention,' understood as an activity through which one achieves heightened receptivity to the world around one, and in particular to moral claims. Murdoch follows Weil in linking the achievement of attention to a kind of 'unselfing' or selflessness. The question is how we are to understand this given that Murdoch also sees herself as establishing a robust conception of the self for contemporary moral philosophy. Lovibond does not so much as acknowledge this question, let alone wrestle with it. She simply takes (i) Murdoch's endorsement of unselfing, joins it to (ii) Murdoch's passing remark that she sees herself as a 'Christian fellow-traveler' and (iii) Murdoch's insistence on the accessibility of virtue to the uneducated, to conclude that (iv) *Murdoch's philosophy discourages the attempt to think critically about received social norms*. But considerations (i)-(iii) could very well form part of a critical political sensibility. The sensibility just wouldn't be hardcore atheist or materialist. Martin Luther King, Jr. or the nuns represented by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious who were recently stripped of the power of self-government by the Vatican in view of what it termed their 'political activity' might be examples of this kind of sensibility; it depends on how one conceptualizes 'unselfing' and the other points in question.

The way to make the case for (iv), then, would be to show that Murdoch cannot be understood along these alternative lines. Instead, Lovibond appeals to Murdoch's famous example of the mother-in-law (M) and the daughter-in-law (D) in *The Sovereignty of Good*. In the example, M begins with a dim and prejudiced view of D as immature and unrefined and then, through an exercise of attention, arrives at a revised and unprejudiced view of D as lively and unpretentious. How does this support the claim that Murdoch's philosophy discourages critical thinking? Lovibond reads the example to be indicating that *any criticism of another* is bad, that attention involves turning a blind eye to the faults of others (23–6). This reading is as implausible as it is convenient. Virtually all of Murdoch's philosophy works to emphasize the importance and *difficulty* of seeing others clearly, without prejudice. This emphasis would make no sense at all if what we were supposed to do was to blind ourselves to the faults in others. 'Love' has a central place in Murdoch's ethic not as a blinding force—a refusal of criticism—but as an erotic force that enables us to see others judiciously and with compassion at the same time. 'Love,' Murdoch says, 'is knowledge of the individual.'

The final chapter is supposed to draw on the findings of the first three to throw light on 'some of the darker corners of our own cultural imaginary' (84). In fact, it mainly reiterates Lovibond's contention that Murdoch is unwittingly hostile to feminism and seeks to explain her hostility as the result of the wish to stand in a privileged relation to men (106). Leaving aside the pettiness of the charge, it is not clear how this is supposed to illuminate the situation of women in philosophy today. The substantive defects of the book are only heightened by the snarky and at times contemptuous tone Lovibond directs toward her subjects, particularly in the final chapter.

Fortunately, we need not depend on Lovibond for a serious appreciation of Murdoch's writings. On the philosophical side alone, there are three new books to assist one: Maria Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By* (Oxford University Press, 2012), *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford University Press, 2012), and Broackes' forthcoming commentary on *The Sovereignty of Good*. While Lovibond is right to draw attention to the fact that women continue to have something of an outsider status in philosophy, only works such as these, which approach Murdoch's writings with both curiosity and rigor, will enable us to see how Murdoch might shed light on the nature of the problem and its solution.

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