

**Maria Antonaccio.** *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*. Oxford University Press. 2012. 288 pp. \$69.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199855575).

Maria Antonaccio's collection of articles from 1996 to 2006 comprises eight of nine chapters of *A Philosophy to Live By*, the author's third study on the thought of Iris Murdoch. In this latest compilation, Antonaccio continues the task of defending Murdoch against disparate views represented by virtue ethicists, theologians, and philosophers alike, many of whom are doubtful of the efficacy of Murdoch's Platonism. This challenge is taken on comprehensively in this scholarly and carefully researched work.

The very textured thinking that goes into Maria Antonaccio's treatment of Iris Murdoch's political philosophy is demonstrated by her careful delineation of Murdoch's requirement that 'persons' are real, unique ends in themselves, standing outside the Rawlsian liberal expression of personhood through a practice of toleration, with principles of equality and freedom formulated through agreements and consensus. The latter approach to personhood is achieved by dropping the metaphysics that had tied reason to faith in the Christian notion of an intrinsically good creation. The notion that human life has intrinsic and unique value is dependent upon the idea as well. Murdoch, an atheist, rejects a personalized God but still wants to retain inherent value in the world and the reality of good and evil such that the statement 'slavery is wrong' is a moral truth rather than something debatable by reason and practice. This is where Antonaccio connects Murdoch's Plato as crucial to 'the orientation of consciousness to the Good' and as 'essential to being a functional human agent' (109). Plato's notion of the Good as real would seem to provide the justification for universal moral truth; however Antonaccio seems to go slightly awry when she attempts to formulate Murdoch's assertion of this metaphysics as the basis for practicing moral vision in attaining toward the good, but then opposes it to support for the value of the individual. Why would she follow the dualistic move, separating notions of a Platonic real from notions of value?

This leads us to a problem pursued throughout this book that can be tracked through the description Antonaccio gives of the inadequacy of Platonic metaphysical reflection to deal with the idea that human beings are valuable because they are human beings (106). This distinction is particularly drawn out in one of the earliest written articles, 'Imagining the Good without God', from 1996, which opens with Murdoch's plea for a moral philosophy as reflection without God so long as it treats of those matters of "ultimate concern" our experience of the unconditioned and our continued sense of what is holy (105). Antonaccio frames the task Murdoch had set for herself throughout *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* as an attempt to retain a moral absolute and a self as a moral agent.

What is puzzling here is that in this framing we get Murdoch as a quasi-Kantian who further anthropomorphizes the subject in the transcendental categories that she so adamantly opposes in her rejection of mind/world dualism from Descartes to Ayer. Murdoch writes on Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and a non-two world Plato because they, whatever their many flaws, reject the dualism that results in the very analytic tradition at Oxford from which she has turned.

Antonaccio retains the Kantian distinction between phenomenal and noumenal, as though it were Murdoch's own ontology, and places the 'natural' with 'a phenomenal world of fact, and 'moral' with 'a noumenal world of value' on Murdoch's behalf (109). Yet Kant bases the categorical imperative of moral agency upon the capacity to universalize morality from duty not divinity. And

Murdoch has protested Kant's compatibility with her project since, 'one may regret or deplore the way in which Kant's dualism seems to deny to human passion any access to the spiritual' and 'Kant has no moral role for what Plato calls Eros (*MGM*, 441-42). This is the strongest kind of objection Murdoch could make given her lifetime of argument for a way toward moral vision that depends upon Eros, that mix of poverty and plenty.

This objection to dualism is borne out throughout Murdoch's writing. Helpfully, Antonaccio develops an argument against such a division in the following case. The line of ascent from the aesthetic to ascetic reflects the clarification of moral vision as fuller appreciation for the value of the reality outside the self. True art, that escapes illusion and selfish desire, comes to be understood as one learns to direct attention away from oneself. Murdoch says that this is a gradual piecemeal business that requires a contemplative stance that enables one to glimpse goodness through another or through art and the imagination (163). Perhaps the ego is still similar to the Schopenhauerian ego for Murdoch, something that must be destroyed, but if that were so, this would lead to passivism. Murdoch does call for moral responsibility which does require a healthy, balanced agent. So the journey to end selfishness still requires a self with a strong identity to have the strength to resist both shallow satisfactions and vicious urges. The death of the ego is balanced by 'an aesthetic countercurrent to this imperative, which allows for the expression of personality and an active role for the imagination in the grasp of the real' (169). Antonaccio grapples with those commentators who do see Murdoch's aesthetic and the ascetic dualistically and while she does not beat them back with a stick, she makes a strong attempt to correct this picture of Murdochian moral agency as removed from the aesthetic.

Antonaccio's seventh chapter, the new writing she brings to this body of work, is entitled 'Religion and the Ubiquity of Value'. Murdoch's assertion that religion needs to be 'something that fills the whole of one's life' (174) is a cry against secularism where segregation of the aesthetic from the moral might occur. Perception of value is constant but it does not depend upon the individual human mind to construct it. Its source lies outside individual consciousness. However, Antonaccio seems to think that by using the term 'consciousness' instead of the term 'subjectivity', she is talking about two different things. But in each usage she is still talking about a neo-Kantian subject who does not have access to the real outside categories of mind which construct cognition (175). In this interpretation of twentieth century fact/value distinctions, the question is, does this deny access to the moral in the long run? For Murdoch, who maps out the subsequent falling away of value after its separation from what we can know empirically, and who thus relies upon the Good as the real source through which we can practice morality, this model cannot work. Antonaccio's suggestion of 'reflexive realism' (167) as a spiritual exercise of *askesis* may remain too limited for such an enterprise as Murdoch's.

Perhaps in an attempt to waylay critics who claim that Murdoch is 'insufficiently incarnational' presenting vulnerability to the void (Mulhall), or is limited to 'self-transcendence' as 'lateral transcendence' where goodness pierces human consciousness from human consciousness (Schweiker), Antonaccio turns to Hadot's reading of Plato's *Timeaus* for the reality of Goodness in Murdoch's Plato. Here, Haldane's characterization of Boethius 'experiencing the real for what it is and being consoled by it' is adopted by Antonaccio for Murdoch's invocation for religious consciousness (178). In the subsequent discussion, Murdoch's thinking is characterized as mythologically religious rather than from her body of philosophical thought. Does Murdoch's thought really permit such a distinction? Antonaccio insightfully mediates the two in an appropriately

Murdochian way: 'religious thinking used to have a place in moral philosophy and could find its way back again, perhaps via a (rehabilitated) notion of spirituality' (200).

Antonaccio is ready to fight the good fight for the fuller, more complex reading that Murdoch deserves, but maybe she enters the battle with the wrong weapons. Any fault, though, must be shared with Murdoch herself. Murdoch makes great leaps from analytic philosophy to classical philosophy before landing in an anthropomorphism that in the 1990's still dominated notions of language and meaning-making. Murdoch's concerns with the relationship between aesthetics and morality needed much more development to bridge her work from *The Sovereignty of the Good*, *Existentialists and Mystics* and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* in order to address her key assertion of the Good as real. Her writing and thinking instead, has given in to her doubts about such systematic thinking where the viable challenge to concepts of unity gives way to some incoherence. This is no doubt why a gifted and diligent thinker such as Antonaccio has to thoroughly re-think the superbly placed clues Murdoch leaves behind, and then needs to in some cases, create the connections between intriguing and richly provocative and prescient pointers.

Antonaccio is clearly aware of key issues at stake with Murdoch's project of diagnosing troubling moments in the late history of metaphysics. In particular, she emphasizes issues within a post-ecclesiastical era of the reality of good and evil as we face our crippled capacity to lasso the sun and restore the tethers from which we have been loosed. In Antonaccio's view, Murdoch herself has necessarily relinquished the role of metaphysics as having a role in asserting human value, inserting 'political axioms' as the life raft against 'private morality alone' (238).

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