

Iris Murdoch

A VERY BRITISH PHILOSOPHER?

Presented to the Tintern Philosophy Circle by Dr Vanessa Dodd on
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Iris Murdoch as a very British Philosopher, not because she follows in the footsteps of John Locke or David Hume, which she definitely does not, but because she forges what I think, is a middle way, a thoroughly British trait, through the British Empirical tradition and the story rich Continental philosophy.

Forges a Middle Way

British Empirical Tradition

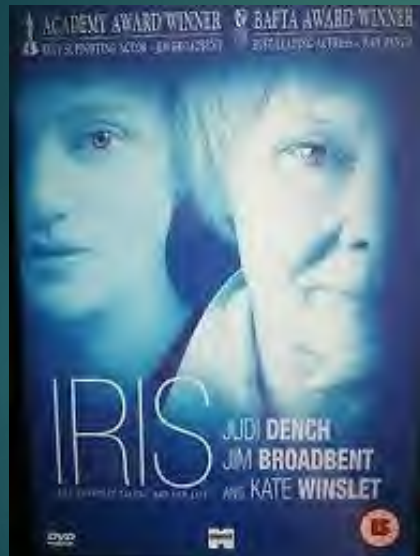
- ▶ Anti metaphysical
- ▶ Undogmatic
- ▶ Mistrustful of theory

Continental Philosophy

- ▶ Theoretically rich
- ▶ Uses language creatively
- ▶ Stories/narratives to convey philosophical ideas

She leans towards empiricism, in rating experience above abstract theory and towards the Continental style in her creative use of language and belief in stories as comprehensive material for the study of thought.

2001 Film *Iris*



Iris Murdoch
(1919-1999)
Novelist, Moral
philosopher and
essayist

Brief biog

Born in Dublin

Studied the 'greats' at
Oxford

Worked for 2 years for
UNRRA in Belgium. Austria

1948-68 Lecturer in Moral
philosophy at Oxford
University

1956 Married John Bayley
(Professor of English at
Oxford)

Prolific novelist of 50
novels



"It's easier to sell junk
when you're known
than works of genius
when you're unknown"

Iris Murdoch

forreadingaddicts.co.uk

As a philosopher she was never an Existentialist, nor fully a Platonist although both come to dominate her thinking and play a role in the development of her ideas either positively or negatively. Murdoch, in fact, comes across as a somewhat post-modern, bricoleur figure in her synthesis of several philosophical and psychological traditions.

Murdoch the Storyteller

'When we return home and tell our day we are artfully shaping material into story form [], we are constantly employing language to make interesting forms out of [direct] *experience*.

Although she insisted that she was not herself a 'philosophical novelist', she did believe strongly that Great literature, was capable of redeeming the so called ills of philosophy, particularly of her time when logical positivism reigned. Stories, she tells us give form as well as entertainment value to the everyday, They are a way of thinking, reflective frames, a fundamental mode of consciousness, communicating the human condition, and orchestrating our emotions, something that narratologists would uphold today.

Murdoch maintains that literature is where

'Man makes pictures of himself' (Iris Murdoch interview 1978)

Claiming that life and literature are soaked in the moral, and the novelist bound to make moral judgments when his/her subject matter is the behaviour of human beings

She thought highly of literature in its apprehension of the existence of others, and its survey of the treatment of others, implying a tolerance even love of the 'other' which, as I will talk about later, is at the root of her moral philosophy.

Main philosophical concerns

- ▶ Art (and Reality)
- ▶ Morality (On the virtues, on the Good)
- ▶ Human Behaviour and the limits to rationalism
- ▶ Human Character and Consciousness

- ▶ *The Sea The Sea*

She believed Art and its relationship to Reality and of Morality, human behaviour and consciousness were interconnected and indivisible.

The Sea, the Sea

An examination of the moral life

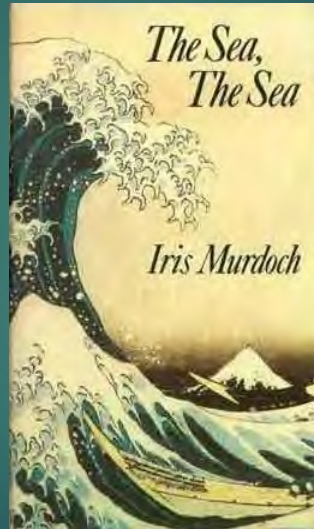
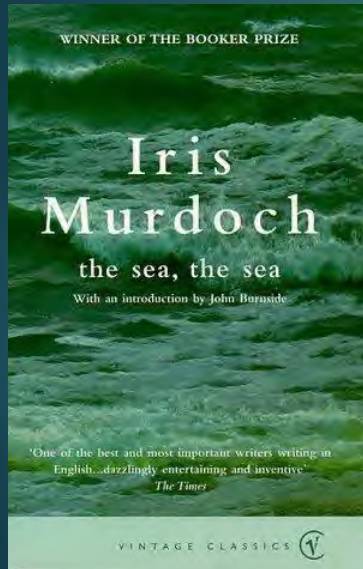
presenting the 'urgencies and illusions of the moral life'

exploring 'how conduct is changed and how consciousness is changed' (Conradi 1989:14)

Platonism

Existentialism

The Sea, The Sea (1978)



The *Sea The Sea* was published in 1978 winning the coveted Booker Prize. Its title was taken from Paul Valery's evocative poem *The Graveyard by the Sea* Although published during a period we call the post modern movement in literature (running approximately from 1970 to 1990 and some say beyond), it is something of a hybrid novel. It displays characteristics of the high Art of the modernist novel in its overt design, patterning, underlying myth and use of symbol of the Sea, which adorns these front covers, and something of the postmodern in its send-up of its main character, arguably a subversion of the Existential hero.

Plot Summary *The Sea, the sea*

is a tale of the strange obsessions that haunt a self-satisfied playwright and director Charles Arrowby as he begins to write his memoirs. **Murdoch's** novel exposes the motivations that drive her characters – the vanity, jealousy, and lack of compassion behind the disguises they present to the world.

The theme of the irrational human being central to all of her novels, but particularly strong in *The Sea The Sea*.

Plato (429?-
347 BCE)

'All Western
philosophy is
merely
footnotes to
Plato' (A.N.
Whitehead)



Founder of Platonist thought and the Academy, Plato has been hailed not only as the Father of Western philosophy, but is arguably our best philosopher. Now Plato's opinion of Art according to Murdoch was not favourable.

Plato's opinion of Art

- ▶ 'All art is bad art, a mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality'. (Murdoch on Plato on Art 1997:373).
- ▶ Speaks to the lowest part of the soul
- ▶ Studies the unstable and the neurotic
- ▶ Celebrates the mediocre

- ▶ 'The sufferings of a 'hero' bewailing them at length, waters that in us, which should be left to wither on the vine'

Plato regarded Art as created by, for and about the lowest aspect of the soul. The base addressing the base. 'Little art' he would argue is about the Good, as goodness, being steady and uninteresting does not serve Art's purpose. Art studies the unstable and the neurotic which it can easily and amusingly depict and celebrates the mediocre and the mean, excusing our self-indulgent emotions in the process. In particular Plato hated the theatre arts, arguing that poetry and dramatic poetry had a bad effect on its audience.

Ultimate Reality

- ▶ World of perfect forms
- ▶ World of ideal forms
- ▶ Realm of ideas of forms
- ▶ Realm of Goodness

To understand further why Plato was so mistrustful of all forms of art , one has to understand his concept of Ultimate Reality which Murdoch admitted is rather abstract and too difficult to picture. An interchangeable term it is also known as the World of perfect forms, the World of ideas, of Ideal Forms and even the Realm of Goodness.

The 'evolution' of the concept

- ▶ Starts off as 'imminent universals' to become 'transcendent models' later on.
- ▶ (Murdoch 1997: 426)
- ▶ Pieces of soul stuff
- ▶ Connected to the Good (not God), morally perfect but not all powerful
- ▶ To numbers. The One
- ▶ Universal
- ▶ Changeless: eternal
- ▶ Unitary, whole
- ▶ Simple

This 'fuzziness' has arisen over time, as the concept as evolved, moving from 'imminent universals' to become transcendent models later on. First thought of as universal, pieces of soul stuff, the soul being of divine origin and immortal in Ancient Greece and later, becoming associated with the Good and later again with numbers and Rationalism. Its elusivity has run the concept into trouble with many questioning whether there is perfect equivalent for say an unattractive form such as mud or a mosquito.

The World of Ideal forms



It is often pictured as a sort of mental dimension that exists beyond our physical world, as here depicted by these horses.

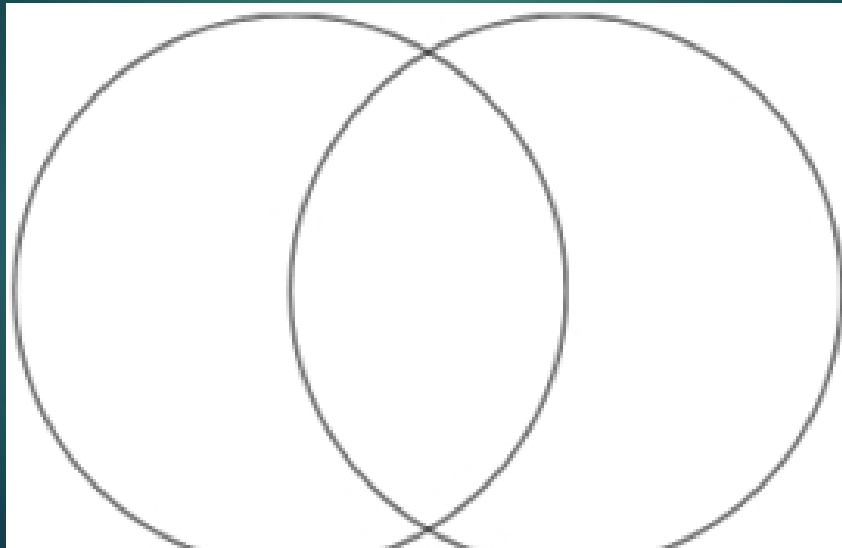
In relationship to the World of the Senses

World of Ideal forms

Heaven, the Good

World of

appearances, Earth



Or as a circle and in relation to our World of the Senses by two intersecting circles creating the almond shaped lozenge of the Vesica Piscis, which in mediaeval iconography, mystic intercessors such as the Virgin Mary were often placed

Bed

God makes the original idea of a bed

A craftsman constructs a copy of the bed

An artist copies the copy



Whatever it is, Plato construes art as an imitation or copy of this 'reality' third removed, giving us a picturesque example of a *bed*. Firstly, God (the only time he mentions God) creates the original and universal form or Idea of a bed, (for we all know what a bed is), secondly a carpenter makes the bed we sleep on, (which involves function and skill) and thirdly the painter copies this bed from their point of view. The artist is thus three times removed from Ultimate Reality or the source. Plato's objection to art is therefore quasi religious. Art or Mimesis, holding up a mirror to the copy of the original, evades the conflict between the Real with a capital R and the world of appearance, the reality with a little r, we live in.

Murdoch on Plato on Art

▶ Plato X

Murdoch declares Plato to be both partly right and partly wrong on Art but mostly wrong.

Murdoch on Art

- ▶ 'Art is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen' [] giving 'a clear sense to many ideas which seem more puzzling when seen elsewhere'.
- ▶ Strives towards perfection
- ▶ Attempts a completeness or unity
- ▶ Has its own truth
- ▶ Is creative and transformative
- ▶ Celebrates human imperfection

Murdoch holds a view closer to Aristotle, believing that Art can have an ennobling, educational effect. She believes that the shortfalls Plato bewails in art, are in fact its strengths. i.e. its depiction of the human condition. And cannot, therefore be discredited by being based on the human jumble Plato decries, or messiness of life on which it feeds. Rather she praises art for dealing with the untidiness of life, for accepting and celebrating imperfection that comes along with bafflement of the mind when confronted by the world.

Great Art which Murdoch defines as

- ▶ being critically aware of itself,
 - ▶ of its 'incompleteness',
 - ▶ of falling short of what it aspires to;
-
- ▶ **INSPIRES LOVE IN THE
HIGHEST PART OF THE SOUL**

Why Great Art is great

- ▶ Presents us with a truthful image of the human condition;
- ▶ Has an interest in human psychology and those underlying forces that propel human behaviour;
- ▶ reveals aspects of ourselves that ordinary dull dream consciousness is unable to see;
- ▶ Transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of human personality;
- ▶ displays the central area of our reality, **our actual consciousness** in a much more exact way than science or philosophy. (Murdoch 1997:371)

Great Art importantly depicts the human condition in a much more exact way than Science of Philosophy.



Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) neoplastic art, the beauty of clean form

To approach the 'spiritual in Art, one must make as little use as possible of reality

Murdoch has the benefit of 2000 years of cultural hindsight. Plato was not to know that a few thousand years later, that neo Platonist poets such as John Keats or non representational Artists such as Piet Mondrian in particular, would attempt to reveal the true Reality of which he spoke.



The contemplation of art

Leads the mind away from the material world enabling it to perceive a new reality

Murdoch is not a Mondrian, nor a Romantic neo Platonist poet like John Keats. She does not believe that art mimics the high forms or Ideas themselves, those at the top of the ladder, but functions at a lower level. She believes that contemplation of Great Art is what leads the mind away from the material world enabling it to conceive and perceive a new reality.

Susan Sonntag American writer, film maker and philosopher writes similarly as does Herbert Reed.

Murdoch on the theatre arts

- ▶ 'Drama, tragedy, belong to the stage not to life, that's the trouble. It's the soul that's missing. All Art disfigures life, misrepresents it, theatre worst of all, because it seems so like you see real walking and talking people'.
- ▶ Women 'live in the never-never-land of Art, all tricked out in Shakespeare's wit and wisdom..filling us with false hopes and empty dreams. The real thing is spite and lies and arguments about money'
- ▶ (Peregrine to Charles Arrowby *The Sea The Sea*)

Although Murdoch does not agree with Plato on the theatre arts, she does however make extensive use of the trope of the theatre arts as a metaphor for the illusory world of appearances, as evident in one of the many conversations on the drama in the novel.

What is emphasised here is not her actual opinion on the Theatre Arts, but her acceptance of Plato's disconnect between Ultimate Reality and the World of Appearances and direction of travel.

Murdoch on Plato on the Good

▶ Plato Right

Plato's Cave (Republic 514a-520a) expresses the relationship between the world of appearances and perfect forms.



In Plato's cave, a group of people, (us) live chained to the wall, watching shadows projected by a fire onto a blank wall, which they consider to be accurate representations of the real world. Such people are in a state of illusion exacerbated by their egoism, giving rise to bad character traits. Now if anyone manages to escape this world of shadows and appearances, as this pair have, they will finally emerge in the real World outside where they encounter the Sun, and the Sun for Plato is a metaphor for the Good, which casts light on the World of perfect forms.

The Soul's Journey

- ▶ Plato pictures the journey of the soul as ascending through 4 stages of enlightenment, discovering at each stage that that which it thought was reality was in fact a shadow. At the end of the quest it reaches the first principle, which is the form or idea of the Good.
- ▶ (Republic 510-511 cited in Murdoch 1997)

Thus the business of Goodness is bound up with Pilgrimage, the soul's journey towards Enlightenment, which Plato tells us, passes through 4 stages at the end of which is the idea of the Good.

Plato on the 'Good'

- ▶ 'It is that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does all that it does, with some intuition of its nature, and yet also baffled. (Republic, 505).

Like Plato, Murdoch conceives Goodness as *something beyond*, a distant reality to which human beings aspire and achieve with varying degrees of success.

Murdoch on the Good

- ▶ Mysterious, human concept
- ▶ Hard to picture and beyond words
- ▶ Accessed only through direct experience

- ▶ 'An 'empty space into which human choice may move'. (Murdoch 1997)

As to the nature of the Good, Murdoch is fairly silent. For her, it is a mysterious human concept that lies beyond words. The Good being accessible only through action and direct experience. Superseded by 'rightness' in today's world Goodness for Murdoch becomes an 'empty space into which human choice may move'.

Nature of the Good

- ▶ Indefinable
 - ▶ Unassailable
 - ▶ Unambiguous
 - ▶ Unselfish
 - ▶ Is of itself
-
- ▶ 'One has to be good for nothing, because somebody is hungry, somebody is crying. If Good equals anything it is unselfishness, the highest form of love.' (taken from Murdoch 1997)

Indefinable, indescribable, as say one of the Virtues Justice is just. We cannot illuminate it by example nor equate the Good with anything, such as love, without being compromised, without having to explain there are different kinds of love with much human love being too possessive and low grade. So the Good is of itself .

Murdoch on the Good

- ▶ Aspirations to be Good fulfilled through unselfing
- ▶ Through paying attention;
- ▶ Refocusing our general trend of desires;
- ▶ Attempts to be good compromised by psychic forces

Only through Unselfing can we fulfil the aspiration to be good, by putting in effort, paying attention and redirecting our focus and general trend of desires. But as human agents of the Good, we are constantly in pitch battle with strong selfish forces that seem to govern us, and here she is influenced by Freud and theories of the Unconscious.

Murdoch's verdict on Existentialism

- ▶ 'Moral philosophy of an existential type is [] Cartesian and egocentric. Briefly put, our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated, and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves....'
- ▶ (Murdoch 1997:338)

Murdoch declared Existentialism a failure, for its unrealistic and over optimistic doctrine and its tendency towards solipsism and the regard of the individual as being of central significance. For unfolding an inflated myth about itself courtesy of Nietzsche. And in doing so, losing connections to the background mechanism of a rich and complicated world from which we can learn how to behave as moral beings.

Existentialism values

- ▶ Assertion of the will to choose, above all else
- ▶ Sincerity, authenticity. Those who strive to be true to themselves
- ▶ Acting as a solitary moral agent
- ▶ 'who stands alone in total responsibility and freedom, only properly and responsibly doing what is intelligible to them with a clear intent'.

At first look the values of Existentialism all look very well and good, even attractive. The existential being, being free to create meaning in life and *free* to determine *how* one lives. Not so, Murdoch claimed declaring them false. Not concerned with anything really other than the Self, these values do not provide us with a standpoint for considering other human beings, nor give us a technique for exploring and controlling the spiritual energies.

Murdoch attacks 'false' values of Existentialism

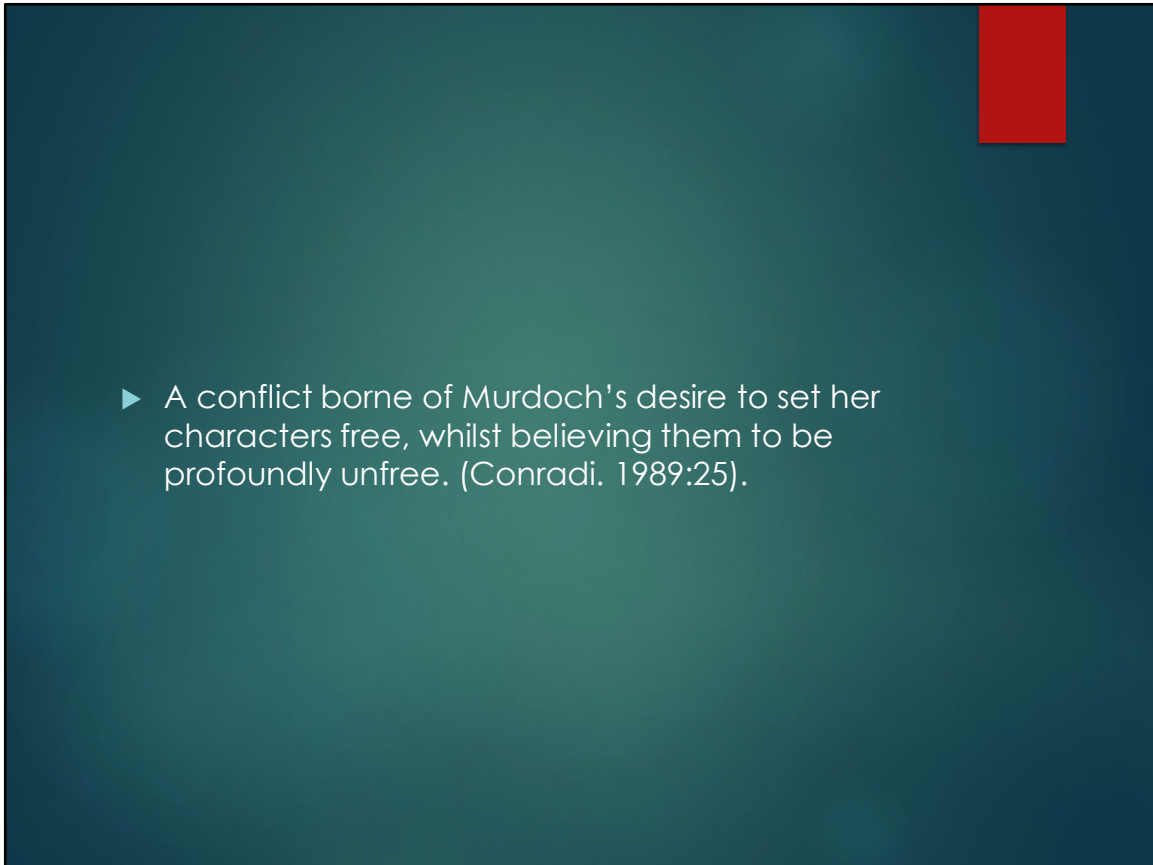
- ▶ For its disregard of the moral consequences of that which it values.
- ▶ Freedom of the separate will *an illusion* (for in reality we are governed by irrational forces)
- ▶ Sincerity, authenticity, being true to yourself, leads to self absorption and narcissism'

The assertion of the will is neither free nor virtuous. Not virtuous, as the human will makes choices without any care for the moral consequences or guarantee that we are right in our beliefs. Not free, for in reality, our choices are compromised by darker forces within us. The active affirmation or the rebellious struggle to be authentic leaves us alone, without a moral compass, empty and doomed to continual frustration. So we end up mistrustful of our inner life, angst ridden, neurotics with 'hell being other people' as Sartre pronounced. 'Hell is not other people' Murdoch maintains. Virtue lies in the acknowledgement that other people exist.

Murdoch's moral psychology..the human drama in *The Sea, the Sea*



Her moral philosophy, often dubbed a moral psychology is nowhere is it best illustrated and expanded upon than in the drama, both inner and outer of *The Sea, The Sea* where the darker forces, the unconscious impulses governing our actions are represented by the mother lode symbol of the sea. The ever changing faces of the North sea, signalling the shifting recalcitrant elements in human nature and the invisible workings of the subconscious and unconscious layers of our psychic being.

- 
- ▶ A conflict borne of Murdoch's desire to set her characters free, whilst believing them to be profoundly unfree. (Conradi. 1989:25).

And where one's struggle (perhaps even her own) between the two opposing forces within oneself are played out.

Inherent drama in two opposing forces within
the individual pulling towards sinning and
saintliness personified by two different
characters

The Sinner

Charles Arrowby

Artist, aesthetic

Governed by his will and
desire

Attached

Undisciplined

Youthful

Of the body

Enslaved by fate

The Saint

James Arrowby

Acetic soldier

Without will or desire

Practises non attachment

Disciplined

Mature

Transcends the body

Controls his own fate

The inner drama is personified by two seemingly opposite characters. The 'Sinner', the artist Charles Arrowby who lives by the will and desire and his Saintly cousin the ascetic James Arrowby who lives by a constant sacrifice of the will.. a disciplined adventurer soldier and selfless Buddhist in service of others, caring, courageous and compassionate.

Exposure of the reality of the Existential hero?

- ▶ Charles is described in the press as a 'tyrant, a tartar, a power crazed monster'.

obsessive

neurotic

narcissitic

selfish

Charles displays all the traits of the dark side of the Existentialist hero. Described in the newspapers as a 'power crazed tyrant', the ego in extremis, he is the leading man in his own life, who directs his leading ladies without care and relegates his social group to bit parts in service to his world. He's obsessive (he documents his food intake), neurotic (he hates mess), narcissitic, selfish, emotionally greedy, possessive and jealous without wishing to give anything back in return.

the Existential Hero –an illusion

The lonely, brave man, defiant without optimism, proud without pretension, an exposé of shams, whose mode of being is a deep criticism of society. He is an adventurer. He is godless. He does not suffer from guilt.



A send up or arguably truer picture of the existential hero, the fare of Hollywood Blockbusters manifesting the superman myth which underscores American culture, exposing its falsehood.

The book as education

STRIVING FOR THE GOOD

In *the Sea the sea*, both characters Charles and James search for virtue. Both strive towards the Good, with varying degrees of success with Charles struggling. Charles is not a bad character as our discussion so far appears to suggest. He is not without the forces of good working within him, nor without redemption. After all, we meet Charles as a *former* famous theatre director who has retired to the sea to distance himself from the theatre world, to repent his life of egoism, even though his former life and misadventures catch up with him.

The Middle Way: Murdoch's hero is not 'bad', only human

Charles Arrowby is 'a new version of a man of faith'. believing in goodness without religious guarantees, guilty, muddled, yet not without hope...possessed of genuine intuitions of an authoritative good'. (Peter Conradi. 1986:19).

For Murdoch, Man is not bad, only human. *The Sea the Sea* is essentially a lesson, an education in detachment or distancing oneself from one's emotions, with James held up as an exemplar of good conduct.

James Arrowby, model of a good man effected through action in the World

A buddhist who practices non attachment to people (*The Sea, the Sea* pp.411-414 Vintage)

A saviour...he saves Charles from drowning, gives him the kiss of life.

A 'secret' agent who works behind the scenes, mopping up the messiness of life.

A diplomat who talks Charles' into returning Hartley, the woman C has kidnapped (*The Sea, the Sea* pp.. 357-361)

Spiritually and mentally mature, James is a progressed psyche. Thoughtful and cautious he seems to know full well, that we pay for every thought as well as every action- a belief close to Murdoch's heart.

Murdoch's biographer Peter Conradi

- ▶ Sees the book as a Buddhist Bardo
- ▶ (Buddhists believe we inhabit an in between world or limbo separating life and rebirth , which is a world of images in which one's psychological projections appear real.)
- ▶ All Murdoch's heros are ' good men trying to educate their own desires' (Peter Conradi 1986)

In fact, the whole novel can be thought of as a study of overcoming the self, of an attempt to escape the world of appearances. Murdoch's biographer Peter Conradi sees the whole book as a Buddhist bardo



Conclusions

SUMMING UP

Her philosophy aims

- ▶ to rescue humanity from a scientifically minded empiricism which is not equipped to deal with real problems.
- ▶ To develop an art and ethics which can generate worthy concepts to guide and check the increasing power of science.
- ▶
- ▶ to think in terms of degrees of freedom.

We are men and moral agents before we are scientists. She believes that Good literature more than philosophy paints a picture of the 'other', and that contemplation of Great Art can lead us away from materialism. That having a simple minded faith in science or anything else, assumes that we are all rational and totally free beings, which we are not, engendering a dangerous premise on which to lead our lives.

Moral Philosophy

- ▶ Anti Nietzschean: Believes that Existentialism is the end result of Nietzsche's 'Superman' concept where the individual is of central significance
- ▶ Moves from Existentialism to a more religious (without God) position, based on Plato's concept of the Good
- ▶ The will is not free and should not be decoupled from the context of the whole person i.e. their unconscious.
- ▶ That Man is not innately rational, good or free, but is 'work in progress'.
- ▶ 'The moral life is something that goes on continually, its never switched off between explicit moral choices'


Man is not God capable of any achievement. The ordinary person, Murdoch tells does not believe he/she creates values by their choices, that it is a matter of attention not the will (Simone Weil) and that we know some things really are better than others.

A sort of Christianity without Christ. There is no God in the traditional sense of that term, who intervenes in our lives, to put it right, but a transcendent Goodness to which we aspire. This does not imply we are not free at any given moment nor that we are victims of a deterministic fate, just that we are in a constant struggle with our innate psychic forces.

The moral life

- ▶ is something that goes on continually, its never switched off between explicit moral choices'.

A sort of muddling on.



Her work exhibits the
'limited, very messy,
imperfect and
unperfectible task of love
and its failure.'
(Conradi 1989: 17).

A VERY MIDDLE WAY



The End

THANK YOU