

## Iris Murdoch on How Platonic Goodness Can Redefine the Concept of God

Mathew Varghese PhD

Iris Murdoch's work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (MGM) is a unique contribution to the history of Western thought when it is viewed from the perspectives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophical discourses. She pointed out certain important issues that were ignored by the mainstream Western philosophy for the major part of 20<sup>th</sup> century but they are now being discussed as the major issues. In this seminal work, she notably introduced the difficulties of discoursing morals and ethics in philosophy that is being constantly influenced by scientific rationalism. Her prolific and intellectually prudent style of writing philosophical issues takes us directly to the causes and the solutions.

The fundamental concern of philosophy anywhere in world for centuries has been

to explain the phenomenal world we live in and how we may have to treat and interact with the world of existence. But philosophy in the modern period due to its close association with the methods of science objectified and systematized everything in the phenomenal world for using it as the verifiable source of knowledge. According to Karl Jaspers: "At the turn of the century, philosophy was for the most part conceived as one science among others." (Jaspers, 5) This development in 20th century gives birth to what is known as scientific philosophy where epistemology created out of scientific knowledge tried to find reasoning for both classical and modern metaphysics. "The whole of the universe by means of a metaphysics constructed by analogy with scientific theories, and with their aid; the totality of human ideal by means of a doctrine of universally valid values." (Ibid, 5) Iris Murdoch in MGM has created a critique on this methodology of the scientific philosophy and explained how it is impossible to have any moral philosophy for understanding universal values within the scientific rational framework. In this study she argues fervently how modern philosophy distanced itself from the systems of classical Greek philosophy: especially the Platonic view on moral philosophy discoursed on the concept of Goodness, which has been interpreted as God. This idea of God, Murdoch, with a perspicuous reading of the history of philosophy, has argued that it, is also conceptually different from the monolithic Judeo-Christian God.

The classical Greek philosophy never declined soul or its intrinsic relationship with God. Explaining Plato's Cosmology Russell wrote, "The world being sensible, cannot be eternal, and must have been created by God. Since God is Good.... God desired that all things should be good, and nothing bad as far as possible." On creation of man and life, "God made first the soul, then the body. The soul is compounded of the indivisible-unchangeable and the divisible-changeable; it is the third and intermediate kind of essence." (Russell, 157, 158) The divisible-changeable and indivisible-unchangeable aspect of God-soul relationship is ambiguous for the scientific philosophers to comprehend, because the scientific rational methodology never could objectively analyze and understand an internal God controlling the human soul. They presumed hugely that science might ultimately reveal the absolute truth: a theory of everything through its rational analytical methods. (Varghese)

To accommodate the scientific views Immanuel Kant introduced objective analysis based metaphysics where Kant considered God as the imperative that should be accepted for explaining the phenomenal world. (Murdoch, 2, 406) Instead of the soul searching for the God or Goodness, the individual human person searches for the reality of the objective world, the *thing itself*: the noumenal world: the controller of the noumenal world is controlling the phenomenal world including human self or soul. This externalization of God is known as the Kantian model of the Copernican revolution. He considered morality is one of the categorical imperatives for propitiating human existence in the world: "For Kant the severance of science and morality was in itself something thrilling. Wonder at the universe occasion a special (sublime) moral feeling." (Ibid, 443) But later analytical

empiricists and structuralists and scores of other thinkers who were inspired by Hegel and Marx declined Kantian Metaphysics and the moral philosophy founded on the externalized form of Judeo-Christian God. Especially Marxism with its critiques on Hegelian totalitarianism, any idea of metaphysics in morals becomes a target of condemnation and criticism, because they believed that the universal value of human freedom is achievable only through economic freedom and declined to discourse on morals as the reproach. "The early moral Marx, more given to philosophical reflection is to be contrasted with the later more scientific Marx who, less concerned with morals, is struggling to solve the problem of how to create a totally viable and efficient economic system." (Ibid, 376) The modern secularists who have refuted the methods of Hegel also have declined God, as it is difficult to verify scientifically. "God as an entity with a proper name, which is unacceptable to modern secularists and also to some modern believers and theologians..... Kant, whose dualism admits no degrees of reality and no love, more clearly marks the breach with Plato, which is taken for granted in modern discussion of Kant." (Ibid, 406) Murdoch strongly believed that the realm of morals is the realm of love and compassion, a value that sadly finds no place in the post Kantian philosophy.

The certainty provided by Kantian dualism lacks any conception of love or Eros or compassion therefore she returns to Platonic metaphysics for understanding the internal structure of idea of soul and Good. By refuting morals based on scientific rationalism and its caricaturing of universal values such as freedom, Murdoch critically observes the general trend in modern moral philosophy today: "Marxian moral philosophy was utilitarian, helped at levels remote from power by an ideal of selflessness (The party serves the people)." (Ibid, 316) She might have worried that this would lead to, as being happening today, the dehumanization of morals, and the modern aspects of morals such as legal system would only create strong fears in the minds of humans.

Plato's conception of morality as the moral will of man is referred in (*Symposium* 206A.) "Good is what all men love and wish to possess for ever." (Ibid, 343) The human endeavor in life is a constant search for goodness and truth. And it is beautiful because it provides lasting freedom. The human life on earth for Plato is similar to the situation of the cavemen sitting in the cave under the tiny flame of a lamp, and seeing only own and others shadows, because of which they live in confusion and fear. But a few among the cavemen have the internal fire of virtue and Eros and would courageously leave the tiny lamp light and pursue the light from the sun and go into the wider world of Good: The Godly world. They could be able to understand the true form of things (world of ideas) and they can feel the beauty of the things. This is the internal urge that each human person seeks to find within oneself for making the life happy and wonderful.

The Christian philosophers have accepted Platonic good as the intellectual conception of the monolithic God. But Murdoch has a different and acceptable view on this: "The forms are pure, separate and alone, the Form of Good is above being. We are saved by

Eros and *techné*, by love and toil, by justice, by good desires and by search for truth, by the magnetism which draws us to innumerable forms of what is good; whether we are philosophers or mathematicians or politicians or lovers, or craftsmen like the carpenter in *Republic* Book X.” (Ibid, 405) Each person’s moral experience is different from the others and therefore one worships a contingent God, like the carpenter who work with the form of cot experiences goodness of creating the phenomenal beds from the noumenal idea of bed, which is not available to anyone else. A personal God of this kind may not be acceptable to the Judeo-Christian God. But on to the ultimate conception of God as Good it is understood that that is not explicable to the human cognition. It is like “... the proper, unique and perpetual object of thought is that which does not exist.” (Ibid, 401) This view is closer to the Buddhist idea of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) or the Hindu idea of Brahman that the ultimate is beyond the realm of human understandings of existence but we will have personal experience of it.

God according to Murdoch is not an object of experience and therefore difficult to explain using the methods of scientific rationality. It is the foundation of our being and existence as we all look towards it but we can only experience it in our own souls. Human life is a pilgrimage going through various conceptions of Goodness. We need to be moral and ethical in life as it is the internal urge of a person. It is like “...the intelligent compassion of the Buddha nature which stirs within each bosom an unselfish concern for other people and a tender and respectful interest in the diversity of the world.” (Ibid, 383)

In this work (MGM) Murdoch offers a perspicuous reading of the history of philosophy for explaining clearly that a proper conception of metaphysics would change the moral decline that is being seen in the world today. She rightly understood that the modern philosophy after Kant only intellectualizes on various conceptions of freedom within a closed framework of individualism, putting human life into sufferings and destruction. It forces us to live under the phantom of fear. She concludes that true freedom and happiness can come only if we associate ourselves with Good and if we cleverly use Eros and *techné*, as the way to achieve it.

#### **Reference:**

- Jaspers, Karl. *Philosophy of Existence*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.  
Murdoch, Iris. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1992  
Russell, Bertrand. *History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1946.  
Varghese, Mathew. “Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) for Caring the Self in the Middle Path” Chicago: *Philosophy Study*, 2012 (May), Vol. 2, Number 5, (serial No 10) pp. 347-361.

(Researcher of Buddhist and Comparative Philosophy, The Nakamura Hajime Eastern Institute; Lecturer of Aoyama Gakuin University, Kanagawa University and Wako University)