

IRIS MURDOCH AND THE WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS AT OXFORD

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In the nineteen forties «there was a remarkable generation of women philosophers»: their work «was distinguished both for their deep moral seriousness and by a willingness to engage with real-world problems, going beyond the narrow limits which linguistic philosophy had set for itself. This work remained true to the spirit of Wittgenstein's quest to free philosophy from the paralysing effect of 'systems'». This is how Mary Midgley describes the Oxford of the first half of the twentieth century, highlighting the crucial role played by some thinkers in order to free philosophy from the paralysing effects of logical positivism. Refusing universal knowledge, opposing totalitarian, unifying *logos*, stepping back from the model of rationality that had dominated the western philosophical tradition, Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, Mary Warnock found

themselves united by the common denominator of their aim to oppose logical positivism and “rediscover the virtue”.

If this is the general framework, it is highly significant to focus on three theoretical threads intertwined in Iris Murdoch’s work, the *individual*, *Good* and *virtue*: the Philosopher considers how the subject, through the exercise of virtue in daily life, establishes a relationship with the Good, understood in a Platonistic way as impersonal and transcendent.

Distancing herself from Behaviourism, Murdoch’s first step is that of demonstrating the existence of the inner life: seeking to provide a realistic image of the *individual*, Murdoch asserts that the subject is selfish by nature, his psyche is characterized by a relentless system continuously devoted to taking care of its own interests. Not only must ethics relate to the whole individual, but it must also possess *virtue* as its central pivot: virtue is the only one that “pierces the veil” of the subject’s selfishness, so that he may have a relationship with reality and may perceive the Good as transcendent. Finally, retrieving the ontological proof of Anselm, Murdoch demonstrates that nothing is more important in philosophy and theology than the idea of Good.

Within the present-day debate, Iris Murdoch, like Paul Ricoeur, defends the theory that ethics should not be confined to the sphere of the normative dimension. For her, ethics is not primarily a theory of duty; it is, rather, a theory of the knowledge of reality: an ethical life depends on how we view reality, things and others. Murdoch, in a preliminary way, invites us to test the pertinence of our pre-comprehensions and prejudices (which we often assume in an a-critical manner from the current *ēthos*): only in this way can we reach the most correct level of knowledge possible, which corresponds to the reality of facts, and which is capable of orienting our moral behaviour.