

‘Holes in the Net of Reason’: a Prolegomena to Iris Murdoch’s Metaphysics

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In *The Fire & The Sun*, Iris Murdoch notes that Plato’s argument rejects both traditional attempts to define knowledge in western philosophy: 1) the Empiricist notion that knowledge is perception, the presence of the *known* when the mind touches it, and 2) the Idealist suggestion that it is rather opinion with an explanation attached (the *logos*). Plato’s genius, she asserts, rather lay in his belief that the ability to distinguish particulars always involves insight into relevant differences that can be unambiguously *expressed* in such a way that “the particulars lie inaccessibly *under the net* of the mode of expression” (*F&S*, p.28, ital. added). These particulars escape the inclusive net of Kant’s rational categories that Bradley Pearson, the narrator of *The Black Prince* terms the “metaphysic... of a catholic imperialism” spreading itself over the world (*BP*, 152).

Obviously, the very form of the *Dia-logues* (even etymologically, a repetition of the singular *logos* as a kind of de-construction-by-the plural) suggests that for Iris Murdoch knowledge lies neither in experience (sensory data) nor in definition (*a priori categories*), but in the subtle differences and drives emerging as we repeat and reply to *conversation*. It is not the Plato of the *Republic*, but rather that of the *Dialogues*—human exchange and its interstices—that she would privilege. Hence, her preferred Plato finds a place for oral, spontaneous poetry, *riddles* posed *by* and *to* interrogating conversationalists, not unlike the form of the *Zen koan*, or the *mantra* repeated with variations, that are invariably repressed in his *law*: a residual orientalism.

Therefore, gaps and hesitations—the often inaccessible, and hence quasi-mystical openings in the net, but crucial to any (necessarily contingent) truth deducible from expression—are agents of knowledge for Iris Murdoch’s Plato as well as for the characters of her novels. The title of a familiar novel, *Under the Net*, is not unrelated to the dialogue between the earlier work on Plato, *The Fire & The Sun* (with its allusion to the Allegory of the Cave) and the later, and more inclusive, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* in which any metaphysics independent of the conduct of everyday life is rejected¹. But wherein, precisely, lay these gaps in the net of reason—contingent reality—and how are they re-cognizable?

Though Plato’s denial of residence to poets (on the ground that they merely mimetically re-represent the shadows on the cave) in the *Republic* is well known, Murdoch advanced the claim in her *Romanes Lecture* (1976), upon which *The Fire & The Sun* is based, that he did not “banish all the artists or always suggest banishing any” (*F&S*, 1). Throughout the lectures, she reminded us that the artist baffles the motive to probe or “reason” in ways that are not merely corrective, but therapeutic. They resist the hardness and logical rigidity of the Platonic Forms. Whereas the exploration of the Forms emphasizes the

intimations of cosmic reason as a function of logical proportion (*ratio* being related to *rationality*), Iris Murdoch's less familiar Plato reminds us that the Demiurge who creates the cosmos and endows it with a discerning Soul, albeit gazing at a perfect model (the Forms), must create an imperfect copy in which humans participate by virtue of a pull towards these models, equated by Murdoch with Eros. Sexuality is the attraction to the impossibility of (imaginary) perfect models which nonetheless govern Eros.

Plato uses, as do artists, pre-existent material which must contain irrational elements. These are in some sense errant causes, irreducible qualities, which tend toward some non-rational order of their own, an ever present somewhat random subversion of proper (in the sense of *proportionate*, or self-same) Form. She characterizes these irrational causes, really *contingencies*, much as did Freud, as *necessity*. In the words of "P. Loxias," the putative editor of *The Black Prince*, "every artist is an unhappy lover...and unhappy lovers want to tell their story" (*BP*, x), as do Plato's dialogic partners, because they cannot help but tell their stories.

We cannot bring these wandering causes under the net of allegedly purposeful—or at least representational—reason (for the errant is a kind of uncontrollable necessity), but can only in Murdoch's language, "*persuade* them" as we would "junior Gods" who allot destinies according to conduct (*F&S*, 50). This "opening" in the net of reason is present in many of the early novels, but also in the late philosophical work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. In both her fiction and her philosophical work, this errant, irreducible trace of some minimally non-rational order, the empty space against which putative rationality generates whatever meaning it has (totally consistent with her privileging of Derrida's *aporia's* of *différance* in the *Grammatology*) is often incarnated in peculiar totems or scenes endowed with animism or objects of protective enchantment which assist in the persuasion of the minor deities. In her novels these assorted, often oriental figurines, resemble nothing so much as the variable pantheon of protective oriental household gods, witnesses to everyday life.²

As a corollary, Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* often singles out the "oriental" nature of the holes in the net of rationality, as when she repeatedly alludes to what Simone Weil termed the "void" of the Ontological Proof, notably that it is mysterious, because it "does not address itself to the intelligence, but to love" (*MGM*, 505, citing Weil's *Notebooks*). Perfectly in keeping with this anti-rational, if not anti-intellectual interest, she takes an "oriental turn" in her analysis of say, Schopenhauer, for whom the Will to Live was imagined as a random "composition of phenomena", appearances, represented by the oriental word, "Maya" (*MGM*, 58). This bent is totally consistent with Schopenhauer's denial of endless willing, in his reclamation of the Buddhist notion of Nirvana. Such is a radical *nothingness*, an extreme asceticism that "marks a serious attempt to introduce eastern philosophy to western philosophy" (*MGM*, 62).

Similarly, her Wittgenstein is simultaneously the philosopher who established a belief in the solely *propositional* nature of the "truth claims" of utterance; the thinker who was very fond of Rabindaranath Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber*; and the man

who believed that the “I” is only “a practical requirement” (*MGM*, 270-71) in *Notebook K* — the last, a common feature of oriental languages where the speaking subject is either omitted or occluded. Hence, in conversation, language often seems to “have gone on holiday,” the resort in the *Tractatus* wherein Wittgenstein famously asserted that philosophy as a discipline commences.

In so many philosophers and philosophical problems in *Metaphysics and Morals*, Iris Murdoch sees a kind of mysticism with an oriental antecedent. The invalid semiotic-anthropologist, Peter Saward of *The Flight from the Enchanter*, a disciple of George Eliot’s Casaubon, discovers that the manuscript on which he has been working so as to decipher its semiotic system, “was written in a sort of Mongolian tongue” which, renders his lifetime dedication to a western Ur-language obsolete. He is betrayed by belief in reductive sign-systems, lacking the flexibility to accept that “reality is a cipher with many solutions, all of them the right one... which we read in accordance with our deepest wishes” (*FE*, 304-305). His opposite number might be a survivor like the Mischa Fox with the “spirit of the Orient...which lay beyond the Greeks” (*FE*, 226), with a posture replete with “legs tucked under him...like an oriental sage” (*FE*, 205). His power, like that of Honor Klein, the student of *kendo* in *A Severed Head* (*SH*, 155), is exerted only indirectly through earthly proxies from behind the scenes, in the interstices, the holes in the net that would reduce the lives of others to a merely “symbolic” explanation. One purveyor of the “rational” categorical net, like Saward on unsteady legs, is the asexual Francis Marloe of *The Black Prince* who is always unwelcome yet perpetually present as an intrusion in the guise of answering a need, even as they themselves are perpetually needy. The “oriental spirits,” by contrast, either unexpectedly “turn up” (often in bed) when least expected, as the surprise of the contingent event, or remain intellectually inaccessible, like the mysteries of lived life (even when they are in bed).

The weird stuff of human consciousness is never accessible to reason, but consists of a collective wherein

“body, external objects, darty memories, warm fantasies, other minds, guilt, fear, hesitation, lies, glees, doles, breath-taking pains, a thousand of things which words can only fumble at, co-exist...” (*BP*, 155)

These contingent effects can never be contained by any order, any net that would circumscribe them in space or time precisely because they are inseparable. Abandoned loves can never be *former*, but as in Japanese Noh Drama, durationally persist as endlessly re-incarnated haunting obsessions, so intermingled with the stuff of consciousness as to be always at the edge of the incestuous “relationship”: i.e., co-existent with our consciousness (or family), and hence either taboo or repressed.

Not even the net of Iris Murdoch’s formal titles can contain these differential leakages of Platonic Eros. Though Iris Murdoch’s title is *The Black Prince*, the title of Bradley Pearson’s manuscript that hers would “contain” has an impossible — given his chronic unhappiness — subtitle, resistant to any titular category that throws a net over the life of consciousness: “*The Black Prince: A Celebration of Love.*” In the space between the two lay the truth of the (Platonic) dialogic between author and characters, the pause between

voices that no singular title or rational logic can ever govern.

Notes

1. Plato's Allegory of the Cave is a recurrent fixture in both her philosophical books and Iris Murdoch's novels. In *The Black Prince*, Bradley Pearson asserts that those who assert that "the mind's cave is full of drifting shadows" should recognize that shadows are never neutral, but *always-already* "saturated with judgments" (*BP*, 157), whose sources are indeterminate. The sun (or *Nous*) is only one source of the shadows.
2. See Chiho Omichi, "Netsuke in Iris Murdoch's Novels," *The Iris Murdoch Review* 2 (2010), 25-34 (its original longer version is published in *Thought Currents in English Literature* 80 (2007): pp. 93-115.) In her essay Omichi not only traces the use of netsuke's in Murdoch's fiction, but catalogues the author's private collection of various oriental objects and books about them to support a more personal interest in oriental thought.

Works Cited

- Murdoch, Iris. *The Fire & The Sun: Why Plato Banished The Artists*. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1977. *F&S* in the text
- . *The Black Prince*. Chatto & Windus: London, 1973. *BP* in the text
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