

Ms. Murdoch's Existentialist Foil in *The Idea of Perfection*

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Abstract

In her *Idea of perfection*, Ms. Murdoch criticizes what she takes to be an existentialist conception of ethics. This conception is not, however, existentialist, either in the sense in which Sartre characterized it, or any of those other existentialists from Dostoyevsky onwards. Whether her alternative ethic is better or worse than that of the existentialist, I do not know; but the one is not in contrast to the other.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch; Jean-Paul Sartre; Existentialism; Ethics; Behaviourism.

Ms. Murdoch's Existentialist Foil in *The Idea of Perfection*

Ms. Murdoch takes as a philosophic foil an ethical conception which is 'behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian in a sense which unites these three conceptions'.¹ She calls this the 'choice and argument' model,² or the 'existentialist-behaviourist view'.³ She takes the existentialist pole of this ethic as 'unrealistic, over-optimistic, romantic, because it ignores what appears at least to be a sort of continuous background with a life of its own'.⁴ Her ethic of attention, 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality',⁵ is meant to take account of this moral continuity. Existentialism is not, however, what Ms. Murdoch thinks it is. She does not address 'a wide tradition stretching from Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Sartre',⁶ but something 'existentialist-sounding' belonging to 'a certain familiar intellectual milieu'.⁷ As a consequence, this existentialist foil is a lacunary philosophy; a faith without its faithful, a belief without its believers. Whether one verily finds Ms. Murdoch's ethic 'a more satisfactory account of human freedom',⁸ or otherwise, it is impossible to consider it in contrast or opposition to anything that can properly be called existentialism.

Firstly, Ms. Murdoch's 'Existentialist' Foil and Her Refutation Thereof

Her Foil. Into her existentialist-behaviourist foil, Ms. Murdoch has 'classified together as existentialist both philosophers such as Sartre who claim the title, and philosophers such as

¹ IP 8.

² VCM 81.

³ IP 9 et. *passim*.

⁴ OGG 53.

⁵ IP 33.

⁶ Midgley 2014, xv.

⁷ Moran 2011, 184.

⁸ IP 33-34.

Hampshire, Hare, Ayer, who do not'.⁹ The former is Continental, the latter Anglo-Saxon.¹⁰ The existence of this latter school of thought, analytic existentialism, is a suspicious matter in need of justification, but no such proof is forthcoming in the works of Ms. Murdoch. Nevertheless, she characterizes both existentialisms with an 'elimination of the substantial self' and an 'emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will'.¹¹ She thinks these characteristics derive from the fundamental 'anti-naturalistic bias of existentialism'.¹² 'On this view, the moral life of the individual is a series of overt choices which take place in a series of specifiable situations'.¹³

Her Refutation. Ms. Murdoch finds this view, that 'morality resides at the point of action',¹⁴ 'both alien and implausible'.¹⁵ It is 'a sort of Newspeak which makes certain values non-expressible'.¹⁶ The will is given a superhuman strength and, because the will 'does not bear upon reason', 'inner life is not to be thought of as a moral sphere'.¹⁷ Moreover, the will 'is isolated from belief, from reason, from feeling, and is yet the essential centre of the self'.¹⁸ She thinks that, if the self is 'so strangely separate from the world at moments of choice', it does not seem right to say that one is choosing at all: 'are we right indeed to identify *ourselves* with this giddy empty will?'.¹⁹

⁹ IP 34.

¹⁰ IP 26.

¹¹ IP 8.

¹² IP 34.

¹³ VCM 77.

¹⁴ IP 15.

¹⁵ IP 9.

¹⁶ IP 2.

¹⁷ IP 8.

¹⁸ IP 7.

¹⁹ IP 35.

Her Thesis. Instead, 'a more balanced and illuminating account' comes from the idea of attention,²⁰ which she considers 'the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent'.²¹ Her justification for this is intuitive, and therefore fragile, that vision is 'the natural metaphor'.²² She does not suggest 'that insight or pureness of heart are more important than action' – 'overt actions are perfectly obviously important in themselves' – rather that morality is not *reducible* to actions.²³ Morality, for Ms. Murdoch, is not 'something arbitrary, a matter for personal will rather than for attentive study', but 'an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*'.²⁴

Secondly, How Ms. Murdoch Has Bastardised Existentialism

First. Ms. Murdoch says that 'M's vision of D has altered',²⁵ even though 'M's outward behaviour, beautiful from the start, in no way alters'.²⁶ She represents existentialism as considering this change 'unimportant and morally irrelevant' on the grounds that nothing happened,²⁷ but this is a misrepresentation.

For the existentialist, 'you are free, so choose; in other words, invent';²⁸ 'all idealism is mendacity in the face of what is necessary';²⁹ 'everything is lawful'.³⁰ Ms. Murdoch has mistaken this rejection of idealism for a rejection of intentionality.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ IP 33.

²² IP 22.

²³ IP 42.

²⁴ SG 89.

²⁵ IP 19.

²⁶ IP 17.

²⁷ IP 18.

²⁸ Sartre 2007, 33.

²⁹ Nietzsche 1968, 714.

³⁰ Dostoyevsky 1912, 704, 719.

M is not, according to the existentialist, “a woman who admires D” because she acts admirably towards D despite her despising her. Rather, she is “a woman who acts admirably towards D despite her despising her” because she acts admirably towards D despite her despising her. *M's intentional spite is as real as her behavioural admiration.* To deny existentialism this is to reduce it to a crude behaviourism of which there is little evidence in the works of M. Sartre, or indeed any of the other existentialists.³¹

M is *simultaneously* admiring and despising. Upon her changing her mind, she becomes simultaneously admiring (intentionally) and admiring (behaviourally). This change is not unimportant for the existentialist: there is a manifest ontological difference, a change in intentional state.

As for the moral relevance, Ms. Murdoch would do well to avoid criticising existentialism on moral grounds. Existentialism is not a moral theory, but an ontological one. Both morality and amorality, valuity and nihility, are consistent with the existentialist thesis, the former as represented by M. Sartre and Kierkegaard, the latter by Dostoyevsky (and perhaps Nietzsche). Existentialism deals with the problem of human existence, not the problem of the good.

Second. If existentialism is behaviourist, the self must exist in a ‘sacrificial’ (social) rather than a ‘solitary’ (solipsistic) realm.³² A solipsistic realm necessarily excludes behaviourism insofar as a necessary condition of the latter is an other through which lens the self’s behaviour can be perceived, and the existence of an other contradicts the terms of the former.

³¹ cf. Moran 2011, 184.

³² cf. ET 225.

A self is a unity and a society is a multiplicity of selves,³³ so the former exists within the latter, but the former does not *necessarily* exist within the latter, because if there were no societies, there would still be selves. Therefore, a self and a society are distinct entities.³⁴

Existential meaning belongs to a self, rather than to a society.³⁵ However, behaviourism mistakes social meaning for existential meaning, and attributes both to society. For behaviourism, the self is necessarily social, which is contradictory: society (the other) is necessarily composed of selves ('selfish'), but the self is not necessarily social ('otherish'), because it is impossible to be both selfish and otherish.

But what is important as regards Ms. Murdoch is that existentialism cannot accord with this behaviourist model. The existentialist thinks that the self exists in a solitary realm, which is why she finds it 'alien'.³⁶ The actions of the self are meaning because their substance is solitary, not social: if it were the latter, then man would necessarily be a social creature, which he is not; 'man is solitude'.³⁷ Whether this is true or not, it is existentialist. The existentialist truly believes that man is *first an individual*, and only *then* does the individual emerge into the social. The self is not crafted in the social realm, but forged in the flames of a solitary one.³⁸

Perhaps this is a mischaracterisation of existentialism, and rather than being isolated the will is situated in the world. However, Ms. Murdoch's 'existentialist' foil is criticized for its solitary will. Either (1) the will is isolated³⁹ or (2) situated.⁴⁰ If (1): The argument is sound, and Ms.

³³ ET 229.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ ET 230.

³⁶ IP 9.

³⁷ ET 227.

³⁸ ET 231.

³⁹ IP 8.

⁴⁰ BN 452; Moran 2011, 190.

Murdoch's foil is not existentialism. If (2): Ms. Murdoch's foil, whose will is isolated, is not existentialism.

Third. To call existentialism behaviourist is contradictory. Man is his choices but ideas are not their instances. If an idea is its instance (behaviourism), then it cannot be that man is his choices (existentialism), because then man would be an idea, and this is the very idealism against which the existentialist rails.

Now there is a seeming contradictoriness to this argument: if ideas are not their instances, then they must be distinct from particulars; so if there are no particulars and therefore nothing to instantiate ideas, there can still be ideas. And the sense in which these ideas exist must be ideal or universal, which contradicts the denial of idealism.

This contradiction, for the valuistic existentialist, is difficult. But for a nihilistic existentialist there is no such contradiction, because there is no such dualism between ideas being their instances (nominalism) or being themselves (idealism/universalism). Rather, there is a third option: nihilism. The nihilist looks down on universalizations and categorizations as lacunary and artificial: he thinks that predicates are empty attempts to establish a relation between the self and an object, or to drag an object which exists in the social realm into the solitary realm (which would violate the laws of the realm, since it would no longer be a realm containing just the self). Nihilistic existentialism is primary, and valuiism must be established after it. This is because the former is before the curtain of ignorance, whereas the latter is after it. That valuistic existentialism struggles with the contradiction attests to the problematics of valuiism, not existentialism. So the original argument stands that existentialism *necessarily* cannot be behaviourist, and it must therefore be true that Ms. Murdoch's 'existentialist-behaviourist' foil is not existentialism.

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