

Murdoch on Good and Evil

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Abstract

Iris Murdoch is the most outstanding British moral philosopher in the 20th century. Her philosophical researches concentrate on the moral awareness of British people in the sea of turmoil caused by the confrontations between material world and spiritual realm. She holds that in the modern world where God is absent, people should take the highest goodness as their moral belief. She endeavors to provide people in the West with Oriental Buddhism to achieve spiritual salvation. As a sentient being, one can surpass the boundaries and get rid of those things obsessing him, and in this manner, he can have a clear idea about the real world in which other people live and strike a balance between himself and otherness.

Key words: Iris Murdoch; Goodness; Vice; Freedom

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INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch was a famous British moral philosopher in the second half of the 20th century, a Wittgenstein disciple, a philosophy teacher at St. Anne's College in Oxford, and a member of the Aristotle Institute of Cambridge. By observing the real picture of human existence, she conveys the philosophical thinking about

Sartre and Kierkegaard's Existentialism about absurdity and truth, self and other, choice and action, and interprets the good and evil in moral dilemma. The meanings of philosophical propositions such as discrimination, freedom and restraint, accidental happenings and inevitability guide people to face their own desires and imaginations, pay attention to the real external situation, coordinate the relationship between themselves and others, and find the ultimate source of goodness in the world where God is absent.

1. THE BACKGROUND OF MURDOCH'S THEORY ABOUT GOOD AND EVIL

Murdoch witnessed the period of British social and cultural transformation. In the 1950s, Britain experienced a heavy blow in World War II, and in the 1970s it entered the post-industrial era. The technological revolution centering on computer technology has made industrial development soar, information expansion then followed it, and later society prospered. However, the crisis behind the technology, the hidden economic crisis and the lack of spiritual pursuit emerged, as Heidegger said: "Technology simplifies nature and mankind into pure resources. This is the logical result of our forgotten existence and control of development for centuries" (Heidegger, 1977: 22).

In the 1970s, the British ideological and cultural fields were turbulent and they suffered from the tidal wave of cultural thoughts. The Existentialism led by the exploration of human destiny and ultimate freedom became the end of power, and deconstruction followed. Deconstruction deconstructs the traditional values of the West by ignoring the rationality of logos and proclaiming the entry of human society into the "post-philosophy era." In "philosophical culture," people abide by the philosophical notion that the most important thing in life is to establish beliefs associated with certain non-human

things (such as God, Plato's Form, Hegel's Absolute Spirit, or Kant's Categorical Imperative). In the "post-philosophical culture", the ultimate meaning is lost, the spiritual beginning of individual and social development is gone, and we are in the wilderness when "meaning" is lost.

The good news is that after the silence, it is back to life. Murdoch wrote: "In the mid-1970s, along with the German mystic founder Meister Eckhart, the Islamic Sufi, and Hindu, the Native American Myth and the emphasis on the ecosystem, Europeans and Americans have experienced the awakening of the spiritual realm." (Murdoch, 1999:1) In the post-industrial society where populations have increased dramatically, pollution has increased, and political lies have been rampant, people have tried to explore through Plato (The Platonist pursuit of the Good), the Buddhist Eightfold Path, seeking detachment and welcoming spiritual salvation. People turn from the field of material consumption to moral situations. The behavior of the period is in line with right mindfulness, and it is a precious creed to recognize compassion and kindness. Murdoch's philosophical thinking came into being in such an opportunity. She is very touched by the disintegration of the authority and the tremors of the Western society. She puts the moral issue at the head of the discussion, and explores the problem of moral adaptability and religious supremacy, praising the people who have achieved spiritual redemption through reflection.

2. MURDOCH ON THE ROOT OF EVIL

Murdoch's philosophical interpretation is full of mirror reflections on the moral consciousness of good and evil. She traces back to the origins of human will, revealing the original motivation to stimulate malignancy. The free will is the state of mind and subjectivity of a person when making good or bad choices. The freedom of the will determines the ideological consciousness of ethical considerations as the results of actual actions. People face contradictory choices in real situations: people can rely on the ability of freedom to be good, let their behavior conform to ethical norms, move toward eternal goodness, and succumb to perfection. The affirmation of the will is the relentless pursuit of the continuation of life, giving people freedom without interference from cognition; the negation of the will is manifested in the obstacle to the life of others, that is, injustice and sin. According to *The City of God* by St. Augustine, God does not mark the traces of evil in human beings. The deficiency of evil is the origin of Adam's abuse of the free will given by God, causing pure humanity to fall, human beings to deviate from the body of goodness, and humanity is divided by good and evil.

Although the will is a peculiar biological and psychological matrix of human beings, like two sides of

a coin, not saying good or evil, it is the ultimate driving force of human infinite desire. There is evil in the heart, and evil will be close. The will to power is not only the survival instinct that we rely on to survive, but also the impulse to live in order to strengthen the sense of self-existence and build a master's morality, thus constantly drawing strength from the surroundings. For example, marriage constructs a sacred and mysterious fence, and mutual complaints replace marriage prayers. Both husband and wife are self-subjective, have equal status and independent consciousness, but also a mixture of good and evil, through the technical sense, establish a master slave relationship. The will to power loses the autonomy of the individual and creates a violent machine. As an intention to tame others, the will of life is turned into the will of power, seeking self-expression. It directs the weak will and suffocates the throat. The will to power integrates the material world into a world of energy. Every dynamic quantum wants to expand and dominate time and space. The powerful quantum is integrated into one, attracting power; the weak quantum cancels each other and the energy returns to zero.

The highest expression of the will to power can be described as a spirit of freedom, but it can also run counter to morality. Its "Solipsism" is the focus of Murdoch's philosophy. An individual is an independent self-sufficient body, the individual subjective intention refers to the other, the other is regarded as a tool of desire, and becomes a direct object of the self shadow, so that the self is detained in the autonomous complex. The inner fantasy of the heart is endowed with reality and extended to the outside world, and the external world that sets off this illusory perception strengthens this illusion.

The evil self-imagination mechanism can also be derived from the moral psychology spectrum developed by Carl Jung's individual spirit. It was portrayed by Jung as a mysterious mandala, the center of cosmic energy. The spiritual development of man revolves around the self-ego axis. (Read, 1953: 391) The self needs to be connected to the outside. When the self masks the truth with masquerade, the factors that are unfavorable to itself fall to the hidden subconsciousness, and they condense into shadows. Murdoch's work "The Sea, the Sea" won the 1978 British Book Award — the Booker Prize. In the human origin and the image of the sea, the unconsciousness of human spiritual activity flows. Unconsciousness is a part of the spiritual activity. She mentioned the director of the London theatre industry, Arrowby, a "monster of hunger and thirsty for rights", who retired and went to the seaside to reminisce. He saw the vision of a black python in the sea, reflecting the dark corners of the mind. "Absolute power brings absolute corruption. The director of the drama is the dictator." (Murdoch, 1999: 40) He is the Prospero of the Duke of Milan in Shakespeare's drama *The Tempest*, who returned

to his homeland with magic and he is controlled by his elf Ariel.

Evil is the devil that destroys freedom and happiness, and is accompanied by human activity forever. The evil archetype is drawn by the external world of the marginal world, constructing a complex form from the inside of the shadow, eroding the base of morality. To escape from sin and find a way to goodness, you can walk out of Plato's dark caves and bathe in freedom.

3. MURDOCH'S RETURN TO GOODNESS

In building a world of goodness, Murdoch criticizes the self-centered moral defects and evil variants, and awakens those who are indulged in the darkness of evil. The emphasis on subjectivity in the Western world has always been the primary position of philosophy. This way of thinking directly to the mind and the hegemonic mode of observation can be traced back to the ancient Greek period. Ancient Greek philosophers attempted to separate subjectivity and objectivity and built a hierarchical knowledge system. (Segal, 1981: 41) Descartes, the pioneer of the 17th century continental Rationalism, emphasized the use of mentally clear thinking as the source of truth in the world, and divided the world into two separate, independent entities: thinking and extension. Dualism leads to physical and mental breaks. Seeing is thinking, thinking is knowing, people and the world are in opposition, and they are insurmountable. People are watching the subject, and everything is turned into a landscape in the eye. The Western world that experienced the world war in the twentieth century collapsed, and the economic slump caused a crisis of faith. Explaining the world according to the precision of mathematics and the mechanical principles of physics has created a stable philosophical view of Structuralism. It seeks to find Archimedes' fulcrum for the chaotic era and to establish an irreducible truth. It advocates God or logos, emphasizing the cold opposition between matter and spirit.

Facing such a contradictory system, Murdoch explored the possibility of returning to goodness. She regarded Kant's Categorical Imperative as one of its philosophical fulcrums. From the theoretical human nature, Kant shifted the moral issue from the other side to the world of human existence, thus paying attention to the boundary that human rational ability can reach. People adopt natural principles as the natural legislation and practise their own legislation through practical reason. Reason is the foundation of human moral value. He opposes the introduction of moral laws from external factors, such as the will of God, and advocates the ethical behavior of the rational existence as the purpose. At this point, Murdoch coincides with Kant. She believes that in a world where God is absent, goodness should replace God as a center of

faith. "Goodness seems to play the role of God. Goodness is not a disguised God, but everything that God has symbolized." (Murdoch, 1993: 28) If God as an external factor becomes the starting point of the moral system, then It will depress the rational light of man. People who can use rational ability to discover inner goodness will make good and evil choices based on moral principles. The moral principle seems to her to be the center of human faith, which is what Kant considers as a priori synthetic judgement.

Goodness is not the means, but the end, because it is separated from the individual's subjective preferences and narrow vision. Murdoch used Plato's "good" philosophy to describe such a moral command of a priori existence, which is considered to be an absolute rule that excludes any assumptions and is an ideal ruler for a limited existence that is endlessly approaching. In her view, goodness can't be seen, but people have the ability to perceive goodness. "Goodness is a transcendental reality." (Murdoch, 1997: 5) Goodness seems far away, but recently, people can follow their moral principles, make their behaviors ethical, and achieve goodness in specific life situations.

Murdoch believes that people are prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave, break free from their own shackles, look at the fire slowly, see the shadow on the stone wall, and finally walk out of the cave to discover that everything is under the sun. This has gone through a long cognitive process, and the journey of seeking goodness in the outside world, where people are trapped in a causal chain, is tortuous. Murdoch defended Plato and believed that we must be alert from ignorance, so that the moral subconsciousness in the depths of the soul rises to the surface of consciousness through the path of thoughts and finally reaches ultimate goodness. The moral subject consciously recognizes the sense of moral mission that he shoulders. This sense of mission is not externally imposed on himself, but is awakened by the real voice from the depths of the soul. This real voice is conscience.

In order to get rid of the spiritual illusion caused by egoism, Murdoch proposed that Buddhism with "empty" and "none" as the essence can pour vitality into the western consciousness world filled with egoism, and dismantle the absolute center. The dualism of doctrine and mechanics has become the line of Ariadne's thread that guides us out of the moral maze. Ariadne, the Greek mythological decree, gave the Athens Prince Theusus a thread which made him step out of the maze of the cannibal monster Minotaur. The ideology of Zen and the concept of Buddhism, which are revealed by "empty" and "none", reflect Murdoch's concern about the overlapping fields of secular world and religious ethics. The randomness, contingency, and heterogeneity of the real world make modern people fall into fragmentation. Murdoch believes that goodness should be the center

of human faith, and it will replace the metaphysical God. Because goodness is not a vague concept, it is inseparable from human practice. People achieve specific good goals by conducting ethical behaviors. This kind of concrete goodness is learned by people through the rational judgment of self and others in their own situation. However, the external situation is changing, the soul is unfathomable, and we are in a network of causal chains. Negative emotions such as vanity and jealousy are enough to become traps for others. Moral values must be based on realities. The demise of life is forcing us to adopt religion that conforms to the inner concrete situation to support the way of doing good. Buddhism is such a personalized religion.

The theatre director Charles, whom Murdoch mentioned, was paranoid because he re-pursued the first love Hatley. He began to plan crazily to let her leave her husband, and sorrow and resentment came out of the claustrophobic heart, making him an unpopular interlocutor in her life. He became a servant of desire, abandoning the purpose of goodness, and choosing the wrong action, which violated the virtue of temperance and the golden mean advocated by Aristotle. The temperate person pursues the right things in the right way and in time, which is what Logos asks. He did not realize that the world has changed, she has a new life, as an independent individual, she has the freedom to choose the right thing, no one can override her intentions as her real thoughts. Buddhism emphasizes that intentions determine the cause of the business. If you don't understand temperance, it will cause greed. Charles began to reflect on the fault after his Buddhist cousin James passed away. Dukkha is like a fine needle stuck into every inch of texture. The Noble Truth of Arising of Suffering shows the cause of suffering. An appetite leads to ignorance. Greed, anger, and delusion cause setbacks in six transmigrations, failing to gain free new life, and creating evil in others. Only our heart is true, the heart is Buddha, the outside world is the illusion, only the "empty" view is the eternal prajna and Nirvana.

In Murdoch's view, the general principle of salvation to achieve goodness is what Socrates calls "good life." People want to find "goodness" and live, "good life" is the highest creed, based on true concept of happiness or Eudaimonia. Happiness and good deeds depend on each other. Murdoch's advocacy of "awakened silence" helps to achieve this kind of good purpose and a happy state of life.

4. MURDOCH ON THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOOD AND EVIL

Murdoch adopts Sartre existentialism as the source of thought. In her view, "the real world is not a definite whole, everything is accidental" (Murdoch, 1997: 351), without the first cause, everything is karma. Existentialism is an unfolding state, whose tone is mournful. Because

people can't choose the starting point and the end point, they are in the world of turbulent phenomena, accumulating the remnants of joy and mourning, such as the Sisyphus, pushing the boulder to the top of mountain, but it can't escape gravity of the earth. Life is terrible, real rather than abstract.

Although existentialists seem to face the source of anxiety and eager to find for the meaning of the universe, they find that the universe is vast and empty, and the absurd situation brings about Nihilism. Existentialism, as a philosophy of freedom, puts forward the central proposition of self-liberation in the real world: existence precedes essence, and this is what can be. Time has essence, life time is different from clock time, it has temporality. We are open to infinite possibilities. The social situation gives people different perspectives of observation. We can keep a distance from life and observe what we do and then surpass ourselves. How to understand ethics from the perspective of freedom fundamentally requires everyone to tacitly realize the faith advocated by Sartre.

Murdoch believes that people often fall into the state of morality and retreat, and making choices in a vague situation requires the ability to forge. The choices of each moral situation are unparalleled, freedom means the ability of people to make choices based on reason. Murdoch's liberal doctrine is based on what Sartre said. Sartre believes: "No matter what I choose, I choose freedom first." (Okalander, 1992: 55) Freedom itself is the ultimate value of individual inquiry. Sisyphus, who insinuated the destiny of mankind, did not put the boulder in the same place. Although he knew that the summit could not be reached, he still pushed the stone forward. This is an attitude to go beyond yourself and seek for limited goodness. This means that no matter what I am now, I exist in a way that I have not become, and go beyond what I used to be.

Although we are called "free" people, in order to continue the sense of security, we have to maintain the situation depicted in the eyes of others, in order to maintain the relatively stable characteristics, we have turned ourselves into the goal of "being for others." If the truth means practicing the original choice and insisting that this is the correct path, maintaining the heart and self-subjectivity is the way to transcend the self. Then the disintegration of transcendence is to let the other person act as the main body to decide the identity we should have. Since it is impossible to completely escape from the fear of the life of social groups, sincerity and dishonesty are destined to coexist. This is the restoration of the truth of life.

Murdoch broadens Sartrean point of view and proposes a vision of freedom: individual freedom needs to be freely extended by others, and freedom means embracing others outside of the self, thus facing an open future. Stretching the freedom of the other does not impact your own

freedom, but makes it firm. False freedom or dishonesty is the result of boasting self-will, magnifying self by the name of freedom, and true freedom is to realize that human beings are not dispersing gravel, nor are solidified abstract individuals, but organic integration. The truth of liberty is imposed on morality. On the whole, she takes the existence of human beings as the philosophical base and focuses on the moral embarrassment and the way of salvation in the proposition of survival. In *The Sovereignty of Good* (1971), she laid the basic philosophical tone: life is free, but life is self-centered. Although life is full of sorrow, the ethical meaning of “truth” means “goodness” and “beauty”. People can transcend the sensory domain by seeking “truth, goodness and beauty” and directly reach freedom in lofty art and selfless love. Art tempers the poor self, reaching Aristotle’s “Katharsis”, purification from the ancient Greek Orphicisim .The soul attached to the flesh carrying the original sin to the shore can be washed with water.

Murdoch’s moral philosophy and aesthetics complement each other, making her concept of freedom more abundant. Murdoch’s moral philosophy provides a source of goodness for the people who are in the dazzling world. The vision of Christianity, Buddhism, and the harmonious integration of Eastern and

Western civilizations, which she envisioned, contains enlightenment about goodness and evil and freedom.

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