

# A disciple of Plato among British Moral Philosophers: A review of *The Sovereignty of Good*

UN DISCÍPULO DE PLATÓN ENTRE LOS FILÓSOFOS MORALES BRITÁNICOS: UNA REVISIÓN DE LA SOBERANÍA DEL BIEN

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Recibido: 14/06/2019

Aceptado: 13/08/2019

**Para Citar:** Piedra Arencibia, R. (2019). Un Discípulo de Platón entre los filósofos morales británicos: Una revisión de La Soberanía del Bien. *Dialektika: Revista De Investigación Filosófica Y Teoría Social*, 1(2), 47-49. Recuperado a partir de <https://journal.dialektika.org/ojs/index.php/logos/article/view/14>.

Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. New York: Routledge, 2001,  
 126 pp., \$16.76 USD (pbk), ISBN 13: 979-0-415-25552-3 (pbk)

**T**he *Sovereignty of Good* is a short volume (70 pages in its first, 1970, edition) composed of three previously separately published essays on moral philosophy by the British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. One of its many appeals is that it is not like the typical (grey-soberly analytical) British philosophy text. This can be said not only regarding Murdoch's lively style of writing but also concerning the content of her ideas. Murdoch's book is a reaction against the predominant Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy of her time. Against the continuous efforts of the latter for making moral affairs either a non-sense or an emotional-subjective matter, Murdoch offers the peculiar Platonist approach of stating Good as the objective aim of the virtuous (unselfish and loving) person's attention.

The first of the three essays, "The Idea of Perfection," offers a critical approach to several analytical philosophers such as G. E. Moore, Wittgenstein, Ryle, Ayer, Hare, and Stuart Hampshire and their —at the time— influential moral philosophy. The outcome of this analytical moral philosophy was its sharp division between fact and value, and the belief that while the former is the proper object of knowledge, the latter lack of any cognitive content — a picture of a world deprived of intrinsic value, a cold neutral realm of pure facts. The moral agent in such a world is the "free" (abstract, unconditioned, autonomous) will, a will of choosing. It is highly significant, as Murdoch suggests, that this picture of the world and the moral subject is also typical of the most famous continental philosophy at the time, existentialism. Murdoch situates her self in the crossroads of these quite the opposite trends in contemporary philosophy and shows that they share more than it could appear at first glance.

Against this "Kantian" (liberal) picture of human moral agency, Murdoch rightfully argues that we perform moral actions, not because an empty unconditioned will, but because we *see* the objective moral value in the world, i.e., values that do not depend on our will, nor are the outcome of our choosing. Those, she believes, are objective features that we must learn to spot in the object by attending to it without the distorting clouds of our selfish nature. To illustrate this, she uses her most famous example of "M" and "D," a hypothetical "ordinary and everyday" situation of moral evaluation from a woman (M) towards her daughter-in-law

(D). (It is curious that here Murdoch retains the pedantic analytical style of using symbols for no reason at all in her intent to argue against this very tradition, perhaps in an attempt to not appear as a complete outsider). Our evaluation of an object is true when we see it how it is through just, loving and unselfish attention toward it. A since there is no general formula for each moral situation, we should develop a sensibility to feel "magnetic pull" of the perfectness of things in order to see them as they are. Thus, love is knowledge of the individual object in its perfection. This is a move directed against the dominant moral philosophy of her time, not only for its cognitive approach to morality but also for rescuing the commonly neglected concept of love.

In the second essay, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" Murdoch struggles between two one-sided opposite trends in contemporary philosophy: the "romantic" humanism (existentialism) that proclaims that we are free, and the "scientific" (reductionist) empiricism that makes of man just another object of nature captive in its iron cause-effect chain. She is not satisfied with either of these views, although she makes a significant concession to the latter when she accepts a "realistic" picture of human nature following the "quasi-mechanical" Freudian description of our psyche. The Hobbesian notion of *homo homini lupus* seems to dominate her view on this. Murdoch openly declares that, for her, human beings are naturally selfish. She does not take this assumption to its final implications, but it follows from this that all her positive views on how we should be, stand against our supposed nature as human beings. So, why we should fight our nature, why selfishness —our true nature— should not be admitted as goodness? Murdoch does not address this contradiction nor put in question the Freudian picture of the self either. She naively identifies a socio-historical conditioned mode of behavior with an abstract (shared by all separate individuals) human nature.

Here Murdoch seems to be dealing with "the death of the subject," i.e., the shipwreck of the idea of subjectivity as self-determinate consciousness and a spontaneous will. On the other hand, Murdoch explicitly deals with the "death of God," i.e., the disappearance of any transcendental *telos* for giving sense to our lives. How to be morally good in a life without God? This theme was also artistically developed in some of

her novels, such as *The Time of the Angels*. Murdoch faces what J.P. Sartre called "starting point of existentialism" in his famous short paper *Existentialism is a Humanism*, but she gives an entirely different solution to the problem. Although Murdoch seems to be entirely in agreement with this divine death, she is interested in the structure of an activity directed toward God as a transcendental object, prayer. For this activity resembles the precious process of redirecting our loving attention toward a non-egocentric object. The Good, supreme aim of the virtuous person's attention, should be similar to God in this sense; that is, in the sense of an object that we could only see if we lose ourselves in it if we "expel" our ego—that "fat relentless" enemy of morality, as Murdoch calls it— from our view.

It is not hard to find this "expelling" procedure that Murdoch is proposing as a problematic, if not self-contradictory, and impossible aspiration. Here I am emptying my self to "see" the other as he is, but if the other wants to do the same, we will end up in the pointless relation of two empty mirrors facing each other to reflect *nothing*. More importantly, this moral philosophy seems to lead us to a sort of "humble" (miserable and poor) existence: the less you are, the better you are. One could sense an inclination of the author to take an idealized image of the "simple people" as the closest to goodness.

This romantic view is even more palpable in the third and last chapter, "The sovereignty of good over other concepts," where Murdoch again makes the "selfish" human nature in a Godless world her starting point. This is perhaps the most positive of the three essays, for it is filled with her views on how we could move from this selfish natural starting point toward virtue and goodness. Putting in practice her believe in that metaphors have cognitive potential; she mobilizes Plato's allegories of the cave and the sun as heuristic devices for developing her views. Murdoch sees the transcendental nature of goodness in the compulsory but yet never quite reachable aim to "pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is." Loving the truth is then the same as loving goodness. The object of true love must always be under the light of the Platonic sun. This kind of vision is supposed to be the key for virtuous behavior, as Murdoch embraces the belief that correct vision occasions right conduct.

Ultimately, the prescription of *The Sovereignty of Good* is to urge us into humility. For Murdoch, as it can be easily deduced from her arguments, this is the closest, the more

similar virtue to goodness. Is humility the virtue which provides us with true vision. "The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are," she says. Even Sartre would be astonished by the sweet innocence of this exhortation, especially when Murdoch repeatedly accuses him of being too romantic or unrealistic. What she does not provide to any extent is an explanation of why being humble is so hard. Here she has nothing else to say except to appeal to a presumed human (selfish) nature as the enemy of morality. The naivety of her romanticism consists of its inability to take into account the socio-historical reasons than make us selfish. In a world in which being selfish is the only way to survive, the humble shall indeed "accept the death," but not in the sophisticated metaphoric sense used by Murdoch at the end of her book, but sadly in a literal sense. Therefore, the path to goodness does not consist of a personal quest of "unselfing" but a historical act of transformation of the social structure; it is a collective struggle for the objective (social) conditions to enable us to become multifaceted and complete selves, not a personal exercise of illumination by becoming nothing, by *negating* ourselves.

Murdoch's book is valuable not because of its uncertain and romantic answers but because it draws our attention toward essential and yet for a long-time neglected questions in philosophy. It is a warm exotic island within the cold sea of British XX century philosophy, and the best of its merits resides in its daring spirit. Its challenging claim is against the famous last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Moral concerns are issues that we cannot afford to "pass over in silence." If our language turns out to be unable to address them within our philosophy, that only means that we have a terrible philosophy of language.