

Iris Murdoch on Plato's Cave



Iris Murdoch is best known today as a novelist, but she was also an insightful and original philosopher, who helped to pave the way for the twentieth century revival in virtue ethics. Although she was always keen to draw a line between her novels and her philosophy, Murdoch's philosophical work is alive with vibrant imagery, and emphasises the importance of symbolism and storytelling in gaining a better understanding of ourselves and our common life.

Murdoch was a moral realist and a naturalist. She rejected the idea of a personal God, but unlike many of the existentialists, she did not think that this left us with a moral vacuum in which we could simply create our own values. Murdoch believed that moral qualities such as justice or kindness were real features of the world, along with other non-moral qualities such as beauty. All of these are instantiations of The Good. By paying close attention to the particular reality in front of us, Murdoch thought that we could gain a greater understanding of goodness and develop and flourish as human beings. Her work is always engaging and rewarding to read, but can be challenging, and contains many references and allusions which will not always be familiar to students in a classroom setting. However, once students are able to look past that, they will also find a rich store of ideas and images that provoke reflection on themes that are relevant to their lives.

About these resources

The narrated slideshows in this series provide clear, brief summaries of Murdoch's ideas on some key topics often taught in the classroom. They can be integrated into teaching or used as a basis for part of your own lesson planning.

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Murdoch's philosophy is steeped in her reading of Plato. She is especially concerned with the importance that narratives and images play in his philosophy, in a way that she feels is often lost in contemporary philosophy. In her essay 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' she is particularly concerned with images of light in Plato's *Republic*, and examines both his metaphor of the sun, and the fire in his allegory of the cave. These are discussed in more detail in her book *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, but 'The Sovereignty of Good' is the basis of most of the material in this resource.

Students and teachers will be familiar with Plato's cave as an illustration of the difference between the world of forms and the world of appearances: prisoners in the cave only see crude representations of things, while the 'enlightened' prisoner who escapes into the sunlight sees things as they really are. Eventually he can turn to look at the sun itself, and not just see the true nature of things in the world, but also the source of all truth (i.e. The Good).

Murdoch provides a valuable perspective on these images in her discussion of self-knowledge and 'unselfing'. Often the image of the fire is not discussed very much at all, except as the mechanism for casting the shadows that the prisoners see on the cave wall. For Murdoch, the fire is important because it represents the self. When the prisoners look at the shadows, they think that they are looking at the real world, but in fact they only see representations projected by the light of the fire. This depicts the way that we might feel that we are seeing objects, scenarios and other people truthfully, while in fact what we are often seeing is the product of our own desires and imaginations. This is why Murdoch thinks it is important to get out of the cave: seeing the false images for what they are, but staying and warming oneself by the fire, would

be equivalent to recognising that our perceptions are based on our own projections, but remaining self-centred and not attempting to see things for what they really are.

The sun is what allows the escaped prisoner to see real things, and this represents the way that The Good allows for any truthful perceptions. Seeing the world lit by the sun rather than the firelight (and eventually looking at the sun itself) stands for getting beyond ourselves in order to cast what Murdoch calls “a just and loving gaze directed on an individual reality.” This involves what Murdoch calls ‘unselfing’, that is, letting go of our own preoccupations and concerns, and properly attending to the world as it is independently of us. Her thoughts on this have a lot of affinity with Buddhist philosophy, and students with an interest in Buddhism may wish to explore this connection further.

Further Reading and Resources

Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts” in *The Sovereignty of Good*, London: Routledge, 1970.

Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*. Oxford: OUP, 1977.

You can read an interview with *In Parenthesis*’ Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman here, which explores the concept of unselfing:

www.irishtimes.com/culture/why-the-world-needs-iris-murdoch-s-philosophy-of-unselfing-1.3890900

Follow this link for a series of podcasts by *In Parenthesis* intern Amy Ward, which includes episodes on unselfing and attention:

www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/curated-resources/podcasts/