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Sorting out the Zeitgeist

The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch

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Bright moonlight flooded down St Giles's as Iris and I, just ceasing to be undergraduates, stumbled home to Somerville at the end of an exhausting evening in the June of 1942. Our recent exams had exhausted us for a start. But, on top of this, our kind tutor had invited us, as a special treat, to dine with two highly distinguished contemporary sages and we had been listening attentively all the evening to their distinguished opinions. 'So finally.' I asked, 'what about it? Did we learn something new this evening?' 'Oh yes, I think so,' declared Iris, gazing up at the enormous moon. 'I do think so. X is a good man and Y is a bad man'. At which exact but grotesquely unfashionable judgment we both fell about laughing so helplessly that the rare passers-by looked round in alarm and all the cats ran away.

Iris, however, has never minded being unfashionable. That is what makes *The Sovereignty of Good* so good – what makes it, still, one of the very few modern books of philosophy which people outside academic philosophy find really helpful. It shares that distinction with C. S. Lewis's little book, *The Abolition of Man*, which shoots with equally deadly aim at the same target. Both books effectively debunk the colourful, fantastic screen of up-to-date ideas inside which we live – a screen which, despite a lot of surface activity, has not actually changed much since they were written. As Iris puts it, 'a smart set of concepts may be a most efficient instrument of corruption', because, as she explains:

We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, self-pre-occupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world.

What chiefly pierces that veil is a sharp, direct perception of things which are no part of our own being. For instance:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important ...
(page 84)

The veil, however, is persistent and terribly hard to detect. In every age it subtly provides new, unnoticed ways of evading reality. Detecting those new forms is a prime business of philosophy, but of course philosophers often find it no easier than other

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people. (It is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher; 'what are they afraid of?') During the twentieth century, intellectual fashions have provided escape by claiming to isolate individuals progressively, first from God, then from their own societies ('there is no such thing as society') and finally from the rest of nature, thus crediting them with an extraordinary, supernatural kind of independence. At each stage, the reformers were rejecting genuinely oppressive claims. But at each stage the real, practical reasons for this rejection were gradually forgotten as one theorist after another (Nietzsche, Freud, Skinner, Heidegger, Sartre, Hayek, Dawkins) dived in to indulge in the exaggerated rhetoric which, when these elements were combined, added up to an extreme and reductive individualism.

That extremism made it increasingly hard to think out any intelligent reconciliation which would bring together the best parts of their various campaigns. So (as Iris points out) what we got instead was a strange, half-conscious jumble composed of the most dramatic parts of each doctrine because these parts were both the most exciting and the easiest to remember. The very powerful image with which we are here presented... is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts. The names of these doctrines may not be familiar to all of us but, as she says, we are all familiar with the ideal figure who personifies them because he dominates the stories that we read and watch:

He is the hero of every modern novel.... This man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy. The raison d'être of this attractive but misleading creature is not far to seek. He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal. (page 80)

Since Iris wrote, environmental dangers have made us much more uneasy about that last form of alienation. Yet the power-fantasy she describes is as potent as ever. What upholds it is still 'the domination of science, or rather ... the domination of inexact ideas of science which haunt philosophers and other thinkers'.

For it is not science itself that makes this wild, flattering escape seem necessary. The demand comes from ideologies (such as the behaviourism ideology of B. F. Skinner) which have used the name of science and have grotesquely exaggerated its power. Put very crudely, what frightens us is our superstitious belief that there exists a single, vast, infallible system called science which completely explains human existence and which thereby proves that the familiar kinds of freedom which we experience every day are an illusion. To escape this threat, theorists have invented a special kind of metaphysical freedom, sending us up, like autonomous hot-air balloons, to a stratosphere beyond the reach of nature and science. Is that where we want to live? Iris comments: I find the image of man which I have sketched above both alien and implausible. That is, more precisely, I have simple empirical objections (I do not think people are necessarily or essentially 'like that'), I have philosophical objections (I do not find the arguments convincing), and I have moral objections (I do not think people ought to picture themselves in this way). It is a delicate and tricky matter to keep these kinds of objections

separate in one's mind. This difficulty faces anyone who tries to penetrate a contemporary myth. Intellectual and emotional aspects of the current veil are so intricately tangled that it is hard to make any special point without seeming to say something morally objectionable.

Throughout the last century the concept of freedom has been treated with an unconditional reverence which has made it seem illicit even to ask, on any particular occasion, which freedom? Freedom from what? Freedom from scruple? Freedom from friendship and the bonds of affection? Freedom from principle? Freedom from all tradition? Freedom from feeling? These freedoms are the easy privileges of psychopaths, oafs and depressives. The prophets who exalt freedom as the supreme or only value do not actually aim at those privileges. They make that clear by their examples. What then (Iris asks) are they proposing?

Existentialism, in both its Continental and its Anglo-Saxon versions, is an attempt to solve the problem without really facing it; to solve it by attributing to the individual an empty, lonely freedom, if he wishes, to 'fly in the face of the facts'. What it pictures is indeed the fearful solitude of the individual marooned upon a tiny island in the midst of a sea of scientific facts, and morality escaping from science only by a wild leap of the will. But our situation is not like this.

Under the term Existentialism she includes, a wide tradition stretching from Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Sartre, a tradition which is less mentioned today than it used to be simply because its cruder elements are by now largely accepted and taken for granted. They are also echoed in a different accent by American libertarians. She concedes that, in facing hard dilemmas, we may indeed feel our situation to be hopelessly unintelligible and irrational. But this (she suggests) is because we concentrate arbitrarily on the moment of apparent decision, ignoring the mass of imaginative work that was done earlier, work which depends above all on deliberate and selective attention. She instances a woman who has been half-consciously despising her daughter-in-law and who, wondering whether she is being unfair, 'reflects deliberately about D until gradually her vision of D alters' This woman now sees facts that she did not see before, not by deceiving herself but by using 'just and loving attention'. The imagination (that is) can itself be used to pierce and unweave the veil with which it has helped to blind us. It is not just a deluding factor or a luxury item to amuse humanists. It is itself a vital organ, a workshop where we forge our view of the world and thereby our actions.

This kind of reflective, imaginative attention, – not arbitrary, sudden decision – is, of course, what chiefly marks out people who are acting relatively freely and responsibly from those who are not. Certainly we have only limited control over our attention. But not even the most bigoted and fatalistic of determinists ever really doubts that we are able to make a vast difference by exercising this measure of control over it, and that the power to do this is a part of our natural heritage. The business of the various sciences is (as serious scientists know) to help in the understanding of such natural processes, not to deny that they take place. That kind of denial is ideology, not science. For much of the last century, modern libertarians of various stripes have been fighting a ghost-war here, not against science itself but against false scientific prophets. A glance at *The Sovereignty of Good* might well help to release them for better and more cheerful occupations.