

## Booknotes

One notable aspect of contemporary academia is the appropriation of individualistic, solitary and often charismatic thinkers by bodies of commentary and discipleship. All too often bringing the work within the standard language and conventions of the scholarship industry actually deprives it of its essence, of the very character which is so important a part of the initial fascination. Take Iris Murdoch, for example, in writing as in life a visionary of unique and baffling character and contradiction, and maybe important most of all as an inspiration from outside the seminar room and the conference hall. Inevitably – as inevitable as the biographies and the films – there is now an Iris Murdoch Society, an Iris Murdoch Review (fully professionalised with peer review and all the other ‘professional’ bells and whistles and replacing an earlier Iris Murdoch Newsletter), International Iris Murdoch conferences, and a university based Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, to say nothing of an ever burgeoning body of articles and books on her philosophy.

Of these last the latest offering to reach us is a full length book by Maria Antonaccio, her second on the topic. This one is entitled *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (Oxford University Press, 2012), and as would be expected, given the nature of its subject, there are certainly interesting things in it. Sin is endemic to human life and almost insuperable. The fat relentless ego which inhabits most of us most of the time is congenitally subject to self-deception, fantasy and illusion. Of these illusions none is more powerful than the notion that value, true value, is something that we impose by acts of will on a neutral, valueless world. Yet within the mess there are intimations of a pure good, both as the condition of possibility of our value laden perception and internal to it, and as the *telos* of our occasional and often thwarted striving for perfection. But this good (or Good) is not God, religion being a persistent source of illusion. We can get closer to the Good by unselfish attention to those around us, the Good being quasi-Platonically the sun by which we can see truly, and also by submission to the necessity of a world and a fate we cannot control.

Those who know Iris Murdoch’s philosophical writings will recognise all these themes, and those who know Simone Weil may well

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speculate about the proximate source of some of them. Maria Antonaccio does do some valuable thicket clearing by comparing the Murdoch vision or visions with those of figures such as Stanley Hauerwas, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault. Martha Nussbaum is ticked off for mixing up Iris Murdoch's supposed personal difficulties with her philosophical explorations, and perhaps more interestingly for proposing a view of human flourishing which has none of the ancient Greek sense that eudomania involves becoming god-like. What Nussbaum proposes is a community of people who 'can take charge of their own life story and their own thought', delivering themselves from the tyranny of custom and social convention. Very un-Murdochian, one would have thought, a gathering of soft fat egos, relentlessly willing their own fantasies.

The vision is certainly captivating, but no less problematic than ever. What occasions the descent into the ego? How helpful is the Timaeus myth here, on which both Murdoch and Antonacci lay considerable stress, given that the demi-urge is himself working with intractable material over which his powers are limited? What is the ontological status of the Good, given the commitment to atheism? And given the explicitly Platonic context of the vision, is there not at its heart a rejection of the corporeal, a need perhaps for an incarnational theology if we are not in the end to dismiss as irrelevant the loving attention to our embodied fellow sufferers, on which Murdoch lays so much stress?

Antonacci does make a valiant effort to reconcile Murdoch's sense of the 'real, impermeable human person' and his or her unique individuality with her philosophical Platonism and its apparent monism, engaging us all in a single universal conception of the Good. This tension is perhaps more marked in Iris Murdoch than in some other thinkers, given her invocation of a Platonic Good, but perhaps it is a tension in any moral-cum-political theory which is not irremediably pluralistic and even relativistic. Such a question hangs over a fair bit of *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*, edited by Efraim Podoksik (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Oakeshott is not much like Iris Murdoch, their affair notwithstanding but like her, while not being not central to academic philosophy during his life time, he engages great affection and loyalty from his admirers. Indeed one of the contributors to the Cambridge Companion is prepared to claim him as the 'greatest English philosopher of the twentieth century', and his work possibly constituting the greatest philosophical system of that century. Possibly not, but it is nevertheless fascinating and frustrating by turns, as emerges from the Companion, which gives due attention to Oakeshott's

philosophical idealism as well as to the political philosophy for which he is more widely known.

Oakeshott, like Iris Murdoch, was motivated by a deep sense of human individuality, and respect for it, at least, in Oakeshott's case, when it did not subside back into the demeaning warmth of some womb-like collectivity. According to Oakeshott, and possibly in contrast to Murdoch, we should not see life as a pilgrimage towards some Jerusalem, heavenly or otherwise (particularly not otherwise – his hostility to political utopianism was pathological). We are rather adventurers, along the lines of Don Quixote (he was an admirer of Cervantes), wandering from one adventure to another as things crop up.

This Quixoticism led Oakeshott to a particular and idiosyncratic view of the state and politics. What the state should be was an authority keeping the peace, thereby providing the arena which enables individuals to pursue their own adventures as they wish. In doing this, they were perfectly free to join others of a similar mind for joint enterprises, which would not compromise their freedom so long as they were free to join and, above all, to leave the enterprise. But the state is an all encompassing controller, which we are not free to leave. So if it imposes enterprises on its citizens, beyond what is necessary to keep the peace and the rule of law within which we have to operate, it is acting dictatorially and illegitimately. The state should act as what Oakeshott calls a civil association, leaving enterprises and enterprise associations to sub-state concerns which people are free to join or leave.

Of course every state in the modern world is, in Oakeshott's terms an enterprise association, imposing on all its citizens rationalistic plans which it cannot justify intellectually (because they always go wrong) or morally (because it has no right to impose one person's vision on everyone else). A delightfully turned sentence on politics shows why Oakeshott is so loved by some, and so hated by others, who lack the wit or the style to reply in kind: 'Politics, we know, is a second-rate form of human activity, neither an art nor a science, at once corrupting to the soul and fatiguing to the mind, the activity either of those who cannot live without the illusion of affairs or those so fearful of being ruled by others that they will pay away their lives to prevent it.'

There are, of course, problems with all this, and not just because no state in the modern world comes anywhere near to what Oakeshott would have liked. More fundamentally it is extremely hard in practice to draw the distinction Oakeshott relies on, between political activities which have extraneous goals and those which are merely, in his

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sense, ‘civil’, having no purpose other than allowing us to live together, simply to keep us afloat as he puts it. Isn’t peace itself a goal, a project which will need all kinds of policies to bring about? And even if this distinction could be drawn, is it so clear that something like the American declaration of independence (which Oakeshott reviled) is *in principle* misguided? In the *Cambridge Companion*, fittingly enough, a fair and thoughtful critique of Oakeshott on some of these crucial points comes from William Galston, who had for a time been Deputy Assistant on domestic policy to President Clinton.