

Iris Murdoch and Common Sense Or, What Is It Like To Be A Woman In Philosophy

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On whether their originality had anything to do with their gender, I cannot make a final judgment, but I suspect that women are less prone to jump on to bandwagons than at least some of their male colleagues, and are also more reluctant to abandon common sense ...¹

Abstract

Philosophy is one of the least inclusive disciplines in the humanities and this situation is changing only very slowly. In this article I consider how one of the women of the Wartime Quartet, Iris Murdoch, can help to challenge this situation. Taking my cue from feminist and philosophical practices, I focus on Murdoch's experience of being a woman and a philosopher and on the role experience plays in her philosophical writing. I argue that her thinking is best characterised with the notion of common sense or *sensus communis*. This term recognises her understanding of philosophy as based in experience and as a shared effort 'to make sense of our life', as Mary Midgley puts it.

1. Introduction

One of the difficulties that women in philosophy face is not being taken seriously as an interlocutor. It is not just that, as in the well-known cartoon, their 'excellent suggestion' need to be made by 'one of the men' before it enters the debate. It is also that their work may not be recognised as philosophy at all. As Kristie Dotson puts it:

It is not unreasonable to expect, in a field that has been dominated by a rather monochromatic population, that the inclusion of diverse people will also introduce wider possibilities for philosophical engagement or, at the very least, demand greater

¹ Mary Warnock on Anscombe, Foot and Murdoch in *A Memoir: People and Places* (Duckbacks, 2002) 37.

recognition for the existing diversity of methods available for philosophical engagement. Too often, people who voice skepticism about canonical questions and methods find they face a recurrent question: “How is your project ‘philosophy’?”²

As Dotson explains, asking the question ‘How is this philosophy?’ indiscriminately is damaging because it risks the exclusion of diverse people and their thinking.³

The work of Iris Murdoch offers an illuminating case study of this phenomenon, because of the significant shift in its reception. The question how her work is philosophy is now much less prominent than it was at the beginning of this century. I was then a PhD student at the University of Glasgow, writing my thesis on Murdoch’s understanding of imagination. Murdoch had died one year before I started my doctoral work. There was a growing interest in her life, but very few philosophers in the UK concerned themselves with her work. Most publications were by literary scholars and theologians or by philosophers from across the ocean.⁴ This lack of interest in Murdoch’s philosophical work confirmed what I was often told informally: philosophers in the United Kingdom

² Kirstie Dotson, ‘Concrete Flowers: Contemplating the Profession of Philosophy’. *Hypatia* 26.2 (spring 2011), 403–409, 406. The cartoon I am referring to can be found here: https://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000eHEXGJ_wImQ.

³ Dotson, ‘Concrete Flowers’, op. cit. note 2, 407. Dotson speaks of diverse people and her concern is with black women in particular. I do not want to suggest that the problems facing different women are identical, but the question of whether their work is philosophy is not limited to one group. As I will show, it has been asked of Iris Murdoch’s work.

⁴ The pioneering work of Maria Antonaccio must be mentioned here, both her monograph (*Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, Oxford University Press, 2000) and the collection of essays, which she edited with William Schweiker and which included the work of such prominent thinkers as Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond amongst others (*Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, Chicago University Press, 1996). The most comprehensive study by a British thinker of her philosophical work which included *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* from around the same time is the chapter by Fergus Kerr (*Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*, S.P.C.K. Publishing, 1997). There have been various introductions and studies of her novels of course, but their focus is obviously not the philosophical writing.

seemed to think that Murdoch's philosophy was, as A.N. Wilson put it in his memoirs, '[not] really philosophy at all'.⁵

Since then much has changed. From 2002 onwards, there have been biennial Murdoch conferences, with an increasing number of philosophy papers. Even more recently, interest in Murdoch's work has been generated as part of the wider focus on the work of the wartime quartet: Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Murdoch. This recent development should be largely credited to the work of especially Rachael Wiseman and Clare Mac Cumhaill from *(In Parenthesis)*.⁶ That this project has taken off so well is evidence of the talents of these philosophers, their creativity, their hard work and their openness to collaboration.

In this article I engage closely with some aspects of *(In Parenthesis)*. Specifically, I ask to what extent Murdoch can provide insight into the still marginal place of women in philosophy. My argument consists of three parts. In the first section I provide an outline of the project *(In Parenthesis)*. I consider different suggestions for making philosophy more inclusive and I also explore why diversity in philosophy is important. In the next section I look at Murdoch's experience of being a woman in philosophy and the reception of her work immediately after her death. In the last section, I consider to what extent her work offers an alternative philosophical method.

To engage closely with *(In Parenthesis)* seems to me the best way to commend this project, though I should add that my approach and some of my interests are also different from Wiseman and Mac Cumhaill. I am not an analytical philosopher and I do not classify

⁵ A.N. Wilson, *Iris Murdoch as I Knew Her* (London: Hutchinson, 2003), 28. The rather defensive tone taken by consequent writings, arguing that Murdoch was indeed a serious philosopher, is further evidence to the initial disregard for her work. In the introduction to the 2012 collection of essays *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (which includes only two essays by philosophers working at British universities) Justin Broackes writes: 'There are people who suspect now, I think, that Murdoch was either not quite a serious and substantial philosopher or not quite a professional, recognized by her fellows'. ((Oxford University Press) 6). See also my reflections on Murdoch as a serious philosopher: 'Iris Murdoch, or What It Means To Be A Serious Philosopher', *Daimoon: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 60 (2013), 75–91.

⁶ Of course, they are not the only ones working on the quartet. See here especially the work of Benjamin Lipscomb. For more information on *(In Parenthesis)*, see: <http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/>.

Murdoch as an analytical thinker either.⁷ For one, her first book was on Jean-Paul Sartre and her last unfinished philosophical work on Martin Heidegger. For another, her writing is evidence of a very broad interest in thinkers and thoughts. As I hope to argue, philosophy needs this kind of diversity.

2. In Parenthesis and Women in Philosophy

(*In Parenthesis*) presents itself as first and foremost a *historical* project. It endeavours to rewrite the history of analytical philosophy to include Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch as a school with its own method.⁸ Yet, by studying the lives and works of these four philosophers Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman are also looking for insight into ‘barriers to inclusion’ and intend ‘to discover unknown factors and ultimately new strategies for gender activism within philosophy’.⁹

(*In Parenthesis*) is then also a *feminist* project, if by feminism we mean any concerted effort to create equality between the genders. Of course, there are many feminisms, if only because it is not easy to decide what equality means. (To give a simple example with nevertheless significant consequences: to provide an equal number of toilets for men and women leaves women with a much longer waiting time than men.¹⁰) Yet, if (*In Parenthesis*) is a feminist project, it is remarkable how little it uses the word ‘feminism’. It was not used in any of the descriptions of the 2018–2019 lectures series of the Royal Institute of Philosophy (and that includes mine). It is rarely used in its publications.

On the website of (*In Parenthesis*), most hits for feminism are found in the wonderful lecture by Professor Pamela Sue Anderson,

⁷ The distinction between analytical and continental philosophy and the notion of continent philosophy are not without their difficulties. See Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 1–2 and throughout.

⁸ Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, ‘A Female School of Analytic Philosophy?: Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch’ [<http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/PENN-trip-blog-post-script-1.pdf>]

⁹ See ‘About’ [<http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/about/>]. Those insights and strategies are unfortunately needed in a discipline that still has surprising few women in top positions and that has been shocked by some very public cases of sexual harassment.

¹⁰ See for instance <https://americanrestroom.org/potty-parity/>.

entitled ‘Silencing and Speaker Vulnerability’.¹¹ I should say the late Professor Anderson, who could tell us much about barriers against inclusivity and strategies for inclusion and who was a great inspiration and support for many young philosophers. To find the word feminism in the writing of Wiseman and Mac Cumhaill I had to go to the latest edition of *The Iris Murdoch Review*, where they explain their strategy as follows:

To be defined as a school is to be recognised by one’s community as serious interlocutors. This is a reminder about how we should approach the history of philosophy: if a set of voices are deemed by their peers to be irrelevant, uninteresting, unworthy, they may not be recognised by those peers as articulating a distinctive philosophical perspective, worthy of recognition as such. To recover those voices then, is to rewrite history – a feminist project, the social and political importance of which is plain.¹²

This quotation gives insight into (*In Parenthesis*)’s understanding of feminism. Firstly, it emphasises the importance of recognition as a serious interlocutor and secondly, it omits the the word ‘philosophical’ from its last line. Rewriting history has social and political importance, but not philosophical? I shall come back to both these points.

Even though the project is only a few years old, it has already provided a number of explanations for these four women’s remarkable achievements. The first came in the exchange that was at the start of the project. In his column in *The Guardian* in November 2013 Jonathan Wolff had been musing about the exclusive nature of philosophy. He revisits his copy of Warnock’s memoirs and asks: ‘What was it that produced such a superb cohort of female philosophers, unmatched, I think, by anything we have seen since?’¹³

Midgley replied two days later: ‘As a survivor from the wartime group, I can only say: sorry, but the reason was indeed that there were fewer men about then’. Men are not the problem as such, but

¹¹ Pamela Sue Anderson, ‘Silencing and Speaker Vulnerability: Undoing an Oppressive Form of (Wilful) Ignorance’. [<http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/silencing-and-speaker-vulnerability-undoing-an-oppressive-form-of-wilful-ignorance/>]

¹² Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, ‘Anscombe, Foot, Midgley, Murdoch: A Philosophical School’ (*The Iris Murdoch Review*, 2018, 39–49), 47.

¹³ Jonathan Wolff, ‘How can we end the male domination of philosophy?’ (*The Guardian* 26 November 2013 [<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/nov/26/modern-philosophy-sexism-needs-more-women>]). See also ‘About’ [<https://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/about/>].

a certain style of doing philosophy is, as Midgley, tongue in cheek, suggests:

It was clear that we were all more interested in understanding this deeply puzzling world than in putting each other down. That was how Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, Mary Warnock and I, in our various ways, all came to think out alternatives to the brash, unreal style of philosophising – based essentially on logical positivism – that was current at the time.¹⁴

An editor gave Midgley's reply the title 'The Golden Age of Female Philosophy'. This title is troubling for different reasons. Firstly, as Midgley points out in one of the interviews by (*In Parenthesis*): 'Four of us don't make a Golden Age'.¹⁵ Secondly, highlighting these women can make others even more invisible. Wolff's suggestion that he has not seen anything like this since seems to reinforce the difficulty that women and diverse people can face in being recognised as 'knowers', a difficulty mentioned by him in the same column and discussed at length by Anderson.¹⁶

This column and its responses, together with the memoirs by Mary Warnock (*People and Places*, 2000) and Midgley (*The Owl of Minerva*, 2005) have added to this first exchange to create an amalgam of explanations. Midgley points out that it mattered that there were fewer men around because of the war. Classes were smaller and the discussions less combative. This gave the women the space and time to find their voice. The women were also encouraged by their teacher, Donald MacKinnon. They were all middle class. They got together to discuss their shared despair at the moral philosophy of their time. (As Midgley puts it: 'We got quite indignant about that!'¹⁷)

Some of these insights return in the website's enthusiastic suggestion to 'host a cocoa party' or start a reading group. One could think of

¹⁴ Midgley, 'The Golden Age of Female Philosophy' (*The Guardian* 26 November 2013 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/28/golden-age-female-philosophy-mary-midgley>].)

¹⁵ See Midgley, 'Four of us don't make a golden age'. Video available at <http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/mary-midgley-16/>.

¹⁶ The adjective 'Female' in 'The Golden Age of Female Philosophy', op. cit. note 14, creates additional difficulties. Does it mean philosophy by women or philosophy practised in a female way? The difficulty becomes even more obvious when contrasting 'female philosophy' to 'male philosophy'.

¹⁷ Midgley, 'We got quite indignant about that!'. [<http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/mary-midgley-15/>].

others: a reevaluation of teaching at university, for instance, which – at least in Britain – has lost its prestige to research. A teacher like MacKinnon might not have been able to find or retain a position at a UK institution today.¹⁸ The excellent report ‘Women in Philosophy’ by Jennifer Saul and Helen Beebee for SWIP/BPA (2011) should also be mentioned here and its recommendations for challenging implicit bias and stereotype threat and the inclusion of women in one’s syllabi and conferences.¹⁹

Yet, what I find missing, is a more direct challenge to philosophy’s method, goals or to the questions it asks. Thus, in the next section, I intend to heed to Dotson’s call for ‘alternative methods of philosophical investigation’.²⁰ I do so by asking ‘what is it like to be a woman in philosophy?’ when it comes to Murdoch. This question is of course a direct reference to the website ‘What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?’.²¹ It asks about personal experience and partakes in feminist practice which takes personal experience seriously, that is telling stories and listening to voices that would otherwise go unheard. This practice is an important tool in challenging power relations. Yet, as Linda Martín Alcoff explains, women philosophers have been surprisingly reluctant to share their experiences.²²

¹⁸ Cp. Stefan Collini, ‘Browne’s Gamble’: ‘The devoted university teachers of a generation or more ago who were widely read and kept up with recent scholarship, but who were not themselves prolific publishers, have in many cases been hounded into early retirement, to be replaced (if replaced at all) by younger colleagues who see research publications as the route to promotion and esteem, and who try to limit their commitment to undergraduate teaching as far as they can.’ (*London Review of Books*, vol 32.21 (4 November 2001), 23–25. [<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n21/stefan-collini/brownes-gamble>]

¹⁹ Helen Beebee and Jenny Saul, ‘Women in Philosophy in the UK’. [<http://www.swipuk.org/notices/2011-09-08/Women%20in%20Philosophy%20in%20the%20UK%20%28BPA-SWIPUK%20Report%29.pdf>]

²⁰ Cp. Dotson, ‘Concrete Flowers’, op. cit. note 2, 408, 403 and also ‘How Is This Paper Philosophy?’, *Comparative Philosophy* 3.1 (2012), 3–29

²¹ See <https://beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com>. This website makes for depressing reading, when some of its greatest hits are ‘failure to take women seriously’ and ‘sexual harassment’. The site is actually aware of the fact that it may discourage women from entering the profession.

²² Linda Martín Alcoff, *Singing in the Fire: Stories of Women in Philosophy* (2003), 4–5. This collection is an important exception to the rule, containing the stories of twelve philosophers, all of whom are or have been employed by universities in the United States.

The reluctance to take experience seriously is also surprising when considering that in the field of philosophy there is an additional reason to take experience seriously. This is Socrates' famous phrase 'The unexamined life is not worth living' (*Apology* 38a). I mention this here for two reasons. First, all philosophy which is not a direct reflection on experience is a departure from this famous dictum. Secondly, for the last ten years or so, I have been inspired to think of alternative methods for doing philosophy as a participant and facilitator of Socratic dialogues in the Nelson-Heckmann-Specht tradition. Dialogues in this tradition are best described as *philosophical* investigations of *experience* undertaken *together*.²³ They offer a way of doing philosophy which is very different from much of what I have encountered in academic settings, because of the central role of experience and because the dialogue is a shared undertaking. Participants try to understand each other and come to a consensus (if possible). These dialogues allow participants to experience that combative forms of arguing are not necessarily the best means to wisdom. They can be detrimental to the philosophical investigation, especially but not exclusively when one discusses experience and thus makes oneself vulnerable.²⁴

Before I turn to the next section, however, a brief reflection on the question of what it is to be a woman in philosophy. This may seem a trivial or elite pursuit, given the silencing of women in other situations that ask more urgently for voices to be heard. While this objection is not without its merit, it is also true that the exclusive nature of the discipline has resulted in an excluding understanding of who is

²³ For a fuller description of and reflection on this method, see Hannah Marije Altorf, 'Dialogue or Discussion: Reflections on a Socratic Method', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 18.1 (2019), 60–75. In this article I comment too on the fact that the emphasis on experience is not always appreciated by the participants, especially philosophers.

²⁴ See also Helen Beebe, 'Women and Deviance in Philosophy', (Katrina Hutchinson and Fiona Jenkins (eds). *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change* (Oxford University Press, 63–73) and Marilyn Friedman (op. cit. 39–60). See especially 28: 'This constant responsiveness to objections and criticism, integrated into the very nature and presentation of philosophical work, may promote an atmosphere in which philosophers tend to avoid investing themselves too deeply in their philosophical positions lest they have to give those up at the next go-round. In this way, it is easy to regard philosophy as a game or contest rather than a genuine search for wisdom.'

and who is not capable of thought, which has had its repercussions beyond the discipline.²⁵

More importantly, the objection implies that philosophy is a luxury and I do not think it should be seen as such. I am for that reason concerned about the number of philosophy departments that are in the process of closing or have closed at universities around the country. In the last few years, London alone has seen the closure of philosophy departments at London Metropolitan, Middlesex University, Greenwich University, Heythrop College (which has closed altogether) and St. Mary's University. This means that in London the opportunities for students with lower grades to study philosophy are dwindling fast. In the current British education system, students with lower grades are not necessarily academically less capable. They are often from a disadvantaged economic background. Philosophy thus runs the risk of becoming an elite subject again.

It is of interest to note some of the similarities in the closure of these programmes here. One is the fact that these universities combined European and analytical approaches to philosophy, were often near the top in terms of student satisfaction and offered modules that allow students to take philosophy outside the university. (For instance, Philosophy with Children at Greenwich University and Heythrop College, Socratic dialogue at St. Mary's University). Most significant is that the one degree that was saved was the MA in European Philosophy, which moved from Middlesex to Kingston. The deciding factor was the REF.

Here one cannot but be reminded of Mary Midgley's comments on the closure of philosophy in Newcastle in the 1980s. She writes in her latest work, *What is philosophy for?*:

... it is surely the effort to examine our life as a whole, to make sense of it, to locate its big confusions and resolve its big conflicts, that has been the prime business of traditional philosophy. Only quite lately has a different pattern of philosophizing caught on – a pattern that is modelled closely on the physical sciences and is reverently called Research.²⁶

The closure of those five philosophy departments confirms the judgment of research as the highest value. We are in a situation that is not that different from the one Mary Midgley describes. And yet, what if,

²⁵ Cp. Michèle le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.* (Blackwell, 1991) 5–6.

²⁶ Mary Midgley, *What is Philosophy For?* (Bloomsbury 2018), 11.

philosophy is not a luxury, but, as Midgley would have it, a need for everyone?²⁷

3. What is it like to be a woman in philosophy?

What is it like to be a woman in philosophy? When asked in interviews, Murdoch seemed reluctant to acknowledge any difference between being a man and being a woman in philosophy. Most famously, when asked in an interview with Sheila Hale in 1976 whether there was a contemporary woman she admired, she expressed her regard for Simone de Beauvoir, but also added: ‘... the subject bores me in a way. ...I have never felt picked out in an intellectual sense because I am a woman; these distinctions are not made at Oxford’.²⁸ Murdoch’s words here are an obvious echo of the famous opening lines of De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (‘For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women’.²⁹) Yet, unlike De Beauvoir, Murdoch avoids the subject or even warns against pursuing it.³⁰ What is it like to be a woman in philosophy? It is like being a man in philosophy.

These are curious claims, especially given the current debates about (the lack of) women in philosophy, which have not bypassed Oxford.³¹ In March 2018 its Faculty of Philosophy decided to ‘feminise’ its reading lists and to introduce the target of 40% female authors. This decision was reported on various news sites, but – as

²⁷ Mary Midgley, ‘Philosophical Plumbing’. *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers* (Routledge 1996), 1–14. See especially 14: ‘it might well pay us to be less interested in what philosophy can do for our dignity, and more aware of the shocking malfunctions for which it is an essential remedy.’

²⁸ Sheila Hale, ‘Interview from “Women Writers Now: Their Approach and Their Apprenticeship”’. (Gillian Dooley (Ed.), *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*. University of South Carolina Press, 2003, 30–32. The quotation is from 32).

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage, 1997, 13). Murdoch probably read the French text. The phrase is similar in French.

³⁰ ‘I am not interested in the “woman’s world” or the assertion of a “female viewpoint”. This is often rather an artificial idea and can in fact injure the promotion of rights. We want to join the human race, not invent a new separatism...’ (Jack I. Biles, ‘An Interview with Iris Murdoch, (Dooley (ed.) op. cit. note 28. 56–69. The quotation is from 61–62.)

³¹ See <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5503059/Oxford-University-feminise-philosophy-reading-lists.html>; cp. <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2018/03/27/philosophy-at-oxford-too-many-men/>.

far as I have been able to determine – not on the website of Oxford University. On the news sites, the comments were largely critical. The following gives a good flavour:

The reading list should include the best writers on the subject. If they are female or male should not matter.³²

This comment is based on a number of suppositions. It assumes that it is only worthwhile to read the best writers and that it is clear who is better and who is worse and that this is not a matter of taste or tradition. Most importantly, it assumes that the reading lists now contain ‘the best writers’ and that some will need to go.

This last suggestion is in a way confirmed by the then chair of the philosophy faculty, Edward Harcourt, when he explains the rationale for this change: ‘partly just because it’s interesting, and partly to raise the profile and status of feminist philosophy at Oxford’.³³ There is no mention that there was anything wrong with the existing lists. It is, of course, interesting to include 40% women philosophers, as it interesting to, for instance, include one thinker from every century or to re-introduce some thinkers from the Medieval period, which seem to have disappeared from most departments. Yet, it would have been more honest and insightful to admit that any reading list can be improved and that philosophy is not as neutral as it is too often assumed to be.³⁴ It is significant that only the student newspaper invited experts in feminist philosophy to respond to the initiative. Both professors Mari Mikkola (Oxford) and Jennifer Saul (Sheffield) argue against an understanding of philosophy as ‘value-free’ or about ‘timeless truths’.³⁵ This raises the question of what these values are, or whose.

I discuss this example here, because some of these assumptions seem to underlie Murdoch’s replies in interviews. Most importantly, Murdoch assumes philosophy is gender neutral. This is a curious suggestion, given that in her writing Murdoch is keenly aware of ‘would-be neutral philosophers [who] merely take sides

³² Lucas Cahal, comment on <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2018/03/14/oxford-university-set-feminise-curriculum-requesting-inclusion/>

³³ See <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5503059/Oxford-University-feminise-philosophy-reading-lists.html>.

³⁴ Cp. Dotson, ‘Concrete Flowers’, op. cit. note 2, 407.

³⁵ *Cherwell*, the Oxford University student newspaper, 13 March 2018 [<https://cherwell.org/2018/03/13/undergrad-paper-in-feminist-philosophy-to-be-introduced/>.]

surreptitiously'.³⁶ That she does not extend this insight to gender could suggest a more general reluctance to consider gender in philosophy. It should also be noted that Murdoch's comments there are not the full story. Firstly, Murdoch's words in interviews are not a comprehensive account of her position. Murdoch gave more than 175 interviews between 1955 and 1996. These are at times illuminating and at other times baffling. Murdoch sometimes provides wonderful insight into her work and her life and at other times her words seem at odds with her writing practice.³⁷

Secondly and more importantly, Murdoch was well aware of gender distinctions and discrimination. From Peter Conradi's bibliography we learn that on arrival in Oxford Murdoch was warned by the Dean of Somerville that 'women are still very much on probation in this University'.³⁸ Conradi also notes that she perceived herself 'as a mixture of the revolutionary Rosa Luxembourg, the philosopher Susan Stebbing and the feminist writer Simone De Beauvoir,' and was advised by MacKinnon never to repeat that to anyone.³⁹ The most immediate example comes from an interview with Sir Harold Hobson in 1962, which took place in the Ladies section of the Union Club. In this interview Murdoch points out the sexism and prejudice of the interviewer to which he subjects her in the actual conversation. He first suggests it is all a joke, but when pressed he is not so sure. (I used this example in an earlier article and am surprised how little it has been noted and discussed.⁴⁰)

It is clear that Murdoch experienced sexism, which should not come as a surprise. She was able to recognise and name it as such, but she did not discuss, let alone write about, her experience of being a woman and a philosopher. Perhaps MacKinnon's advice

³⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Vintage, 2001), 76.

³⁷ See Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (Continuum, 2008) 2–6.

³⁸ Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*. (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001) 82, quoting Fera Varnell, the Dean of Somerville. See also Marije Altorf, 'After Cursing the Library: Iris Murdoch and the (In)visibility of Women in Philosophy'. *Hypatia* 26–2 (2011), 384–402. In this article I offer a critical reading of the three biographies/memoirs that were published shortly after Murdoch's death in 1999 (the memoirs by her husband John Bayley, the biography by Peter Conradi and A.N. Wilson).

³⁹ Conradi op. cit., 256.

⁴⁰ See Marije Altorf, 'Reassessing Iris Murdoch in the Light of Feminist Philosophy: Michèle le Doeuff and the Philosophical Imaginary.' Anne Rowe (ed.), *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 175–186.

stopped her from ever bringing it up again. There is, of course, no obligation to speak of one's experience, including one's experience of being a woman. The subject is 'boring' and 'irritating'. This was true in 1948, it was true in 1962 and, I would argue, is still true today. Any space that promises to take us out of that messiness has to be welcomed and philosophy still promises to be such a space.⁴¹ Yet, it does not follow that Murdoch was not affected by being a woman. This is poignantly obvious when considering the first years after her death.

In the early 2000s Murdoch, philosopher and novelist, was even more famous for a third reason: for suffering from Alzheimer's disease at the end of her life and for having a lot of sex with different people when she was young. In those years people would mention the film first when I told them I was working on Iris Murdoch. This film, *Iris* (2001), is a moving portrait of someone who cares about a spouse with Alzheimer. Yet, even though there is ample talk about Murdoch's work and how wonderful it is, the film contains hardly any of her words or ideas. I counted one slightly adopted line from *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and one quotation from the letter by Paul to the Philippians, with which Murdoch ends *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.⁴² What is it like to be a woman in philosophy? Is it to be remembered for someone other than your thoughts? Not to be given your own voice?

In addition to the difficulties noted above, Murdoch's oeuvre adds more complication. Murdoch was and probably is better known as a novelist. This creates the difficulty of her oeuvre. How do the two genres relate? Can we read the one without the other? Can we even make a distinction between the two? It may be possible that the novels allowed Murdoch a financial and intellectual independence, yet the growing distance to academic philosophy seems also to have troubled her. In interviews Murdoch was reluctant to call herself a philosopher.⁴³ She shares this reluctance with two other great thinkers from the twentieth century, De Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, whose work – like Murdoch's – is not easy to pigeonhole.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Cp. Le Doeuff, *op. cit.* note 25, 9–10.

⁴² On rereading *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Penguin, 1992) recently, I recognised a short quotation from 497 and of course the very last quote, 512.

⁴³ See the interview with M. Le Gros, quoted in Hilda Spear, *Iris Murdoch* (Palgrave, 2006), 9.

⁴⁴ Especially *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), her Gifford lectures from 1982, has puzzled readers even since it was first published. For a

What is it like to be a woman in philosophy? It is to be annoyed with that question, it is to be deeply aware of gender distinctions and bored by it, it is to have your first name as the title of a film that has only one sentence from your own writing in it and it is to confuse future scholars with the nature of your oeuvre. In short, there is no easy answer to the question, but ignoring it may result in not seeing how some gender stereotypes have moved us away from Murdoch's work or to overlook its attempt at inclusivity. I discuss this last aspect in the next section.

4. Common sense - *sensus communis*

Murdoch may have denied the existence of gender distinctions in Oxford, but – like other members of the quartet – she was aware of the divergence between her philosophical thinking and that encountered in Oxford. In this section I argue that her work offers an alternative philosophical method, which I characterise as common sense, or *sensus communis*. I thus engage again more directly with the project of (*In Parenthesis*), in particular their characterisation of the Quartet's attitude as 'uncommon sense realism'.

In almost all her writing Murdoch is concerned with not just arguments, but also the *form* which arguments take or should take.⁴⁵ The three essays in *The Sovereignty of Good* provide insightful examples. In the first, 'The Idea of Perfection', Murdoch proclaims that '[t]here is a two-way movement in philosophy, a movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts.'⁴⁶ She announces that she will attempt a 'movement of return'. The second essay, 'On "God" and "Good"' begins with the provoking sentence: 'To do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth'.⁴⁷ The third essay, 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other

wonderful collection of illuminating articles in the work, see Nora Hämmäläinen, Gillian Doolley (eds.), *Reading Iris Murdoch's Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁴⁵ This aspect was recently brought to my attention again in a lecture by Mark Hopwood, Pardubice 8 June 2019.

⁴⁶ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, op. cit. note 36, 1.

⁴⁷ Murdoch, op. cit. note 36, 47.

Concepts', takes issue with the disregard for metaphors held 'by many contemporary thinkers'.⁴⁸

I am in particular interested in the return to simple and obvious facts, for this is a returning trope especially in Murdoch's earlier writing. Murdoch often distances herself from the dominant philosophical argumentation and takes the position of an outsider, siding with the ordinary, the 'simple' and 'obvious', with 'us,' 'when we are not philosophising'.⁴⁹ She also introduces outsiders to the philosophical debate: the virtuous peasants, 'some quiet unpretentious worker, a schoolteacher, or a mother, or better still an aunt.'⁵⁰ She lets an argument be interrupted by 'people [who] may begin to protest and cry out and say that something has been taken from them.'⁵¹

This trope of the virtuous peasant has been criticised for being literary fiction more than an actual person and Murdoch has been accused of living in an ivory tower.⁵² Murdoch seems aware of this criticism when she exclaims in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: 'I have known such aunts'.⁵³ While the criticism is not without foundation, I don't think it is sufficient reason to dismiss these references. The voices are disruptive to Murdoch's argument. Murdoch heeds to voices outside the academic debate, even when they are more like a cry and less like a fully fledged argument. These voices are thus proof of Murdoch's attempt to make philosophy more inclusive, even if it is not as inclusive as her critics might like.

This concern with the form of argument does not necessarily place Murdoch outside the tradition of philosophy. On the contrary, it can be understood in a long tradition of philosophers who marked a clear break with their predecessors (such as, for instance, René Descartes or A.J. Ayer). Yet, to do so would be to miss an opportunity to rethink the history and practices of philosophy. Alternative placing is suggested by the work of different feminist thinkers and most succinctly presented in the musings that conclude the first chapter of

⁴⁸ Murdoch, op. cit. note 36, 75.

⁴⁹ Murdoch 'Thinking and Language', *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Edited and with a Preface by Peter Conradi. Foreword by George Steiner. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997) 33–42. The quotation is from 33.

⁵⁰ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, op. cit. note 42, 429.

⁵¹ Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good*, op. cit. note 36, 13

⁵² See Conradi, op. cit. note 38 244. Cp. too Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Judicial Imagination: Writing after Nuremberg*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

⁵³ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, op. cit. note 42, 429.

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Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The narrator has talked of a visit to Oxbridge, where her thought is first interrupted when she is stopped from walking on the grass and next when she is barred from entering the library. She has had a copious lunch at a men's college and a more frugal dinner at a women's college and then on her way back to her room at the end of the day: 'I pondered ... what effect poverty has on the mind; and what effect wealth has on the mind; ... I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in'.⁵⁴ Woolf cautions that being an outsider is not an entirely undesirable condition, even if it is likely to be short on money. She thus makes us reflect on any attempt to move the outsider inside.

In their 'Women in the History of Philosophy' lecture at the University of Sheffield in 2017, Wiseman and Mac Cumhaill characterise the four women's stance as 'uncommon sense realism'. They explain this term as follows: 'The realistic spirit described involves a strong commitment to 'common sense', but not in the manner of linguistic philosophers like Hare and 'ordinary language' philosophers like Austin.' 'Uncommon sense' then, because of common sense's possible association with Hare and Austin. 'Uncommon sense' too, because of the realism of these women, taking a realistic attitude is 'an *uncommon* achievement.'⁵⁵

I have wondered whether the term 'uncommon sense' has been inspired by the quotation at the start of my article. The quotation comes from Mary Warnock's memoirs and I have used it in an earlier text. Warnock reflects here on the exceptional generation who were her seniors by only a few years:

On whether their originality had anything to do with gender, I cannot make a final judgment, but I suspect that women are less prone to jump on to bandwagons than at least some of their male colleagues and are also more reluctant to abandon common sense ...⁵⁶

In an earlier article I attributed probably more significance to these lines than Warnock allows for. I related the quotation to the prominent trope of the outsider in Murdoch's writing and I argued that it was the literary tradition of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters,

⁵⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1957), 24.

⁵⁵ Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 'A Female School of Academic Philosophy?', op. cit. note 8.

⁵⁶ Warnock, *A Memoir: People and Places*, op. cit. note 1, 37.

Mrs Gaskell that allowed Murdoch to take her position of an outsider in academic philosophy.⁵⁷

I agree that ‘common sense’ is a difficult term for the reasons Wiseman and Mac Cumhaill mention and perhaps even more so because in our everyday conversations it has the connotation of exclusion. People are admonished for not showing any common sense rather than appraised for showing any. One is told off for having no common sense when cutting oneself, rather than praised for exhibiting plenty of common sense when preparing a meal without the need for plasters. Yet, despite these concerns, I would want to plead for the use of the term ‘common sense’ – or perhaps the Latin *sensus communis* – to understand the achievements of these women and in particular of Murdoch. *Sensus communis* may challenge philosophical practice in a way that I am still exploring. What follows is a first indication of its promise.

Common sense has – as far as I know – two distinct histories in philosophy. The traditions are probably not as separate as I present them here, but I have found no cross reference. The one history is that of – roughly – Thomas Reid, G.E. Moore and others, who claim the certainty of self-evident truths. The assumption is that such truths are ‘no sooner understood than they are believed’.⁵⁸ They form the foundation of philosophical reflection. The other tradition is that of Immanuel Kant and more recently, and for this article more importantly, Hannah Arendt. Common sense is here *sensus communis*.⁵⁹ Arendt understands this as the sixth sense and as a sense that we share. While historically Murdoch is associated more with Moore than Arendt, I shall use Arendt’s rather than Moore’s understanding here.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Altorf, ‘After Cursing the Library’, op. cit. note 38.

⁵⁸ Thomas Reid as quoted in Nichols, Ryan and Gideon Yaffe, ‘Thomas Reid’, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition) [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/reid/>].

⁵⁹ Arendt uses different terms for common sense (‘common sense’, *Gesunder Menschenverstand*, *le bon sense*, *sensus communis*, *Gemeinsinn*). See Marieke Borren, ‘A Sense of the World: Hannah Arendt’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Common Sense’. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 21(2) (2013), 22–255.

⁶⁰ There are, as far as I know, very few references to Arendt in Murdoch’s writing. Nevertheless, there are important connections between the two thinkers. See Frances White ‘Iris Murdoch and Hannah Arendt: Two Women in Dark Times’. M. F. Simone Roberts and Alison

Arendt understands common sense as a sense of what is in common. Common sense, she writes, ‘...assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves.’⁶¹ I know that the coffee in my cup is real, because my different senses confirm this (it looks like coffee, it smells like coffee, it tastes like coffee and as much as that is possible it feels and sounds like coffee). I also know it is real because it is common to myself and others (the moment of drinking coffee is often a social event at a particular time of the day. Or to put it differently, no one is behaving as if there is no cup on the table or as if I am about to drink poison, etc.). In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes: ‘the presence of others, who see and hear what we see and hear assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves.’⁶²

Common sense reassures us of reality. The notion thus understood reminds of the experiences of women and diverse people in philosophy, who feel excluded and also disconnected when for instance the misogyny of a thinker is treated as a mere joke. In Arendt’s work common sense plays an important part in her understanding of totalitarianism. Common sense is vulnerable and can leave us. We see innocent people being led away and yet we can’t believe our eyes, especially when no one else seem to acknowledge the awful reality.

If common sense is thus understood, the question remains whether common sense is taken as either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. Do we hold whatever it is as common sense by virtue of our humanity or whether it is acquired during our lives and perhaps specific to the community we are part of? Both these understandings can lead to exclusivity, either when one is denied one’s humanity or excluded from a community.⁶³ A way out of this problem is suggested by Marieke Borren, who emphasises the phenomenological nature of Arendt’s writing: ‘As a phenomenologist, [Arendt] rejects the idea of human nature altogether and instead adopts the perspective of human

Scott-Bauman (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination*. McFarland, (2010) 13–33.

⁶¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 50.

⁶² Arendt op. cit., 50. The English language has at least two expressions for this experience of losing one’s sense of reality, because one is longer certain that others see and hear what we see and hear: the elephant in the room and gaslighting.

⁶³ Borren, op. cit. note 58, 226–7. Borren argues that much of this debate is based around the question of whether Arendt’s Kant-lectures are exegesis or present her own thinking and position.

conditions, which may or may not be realized, depending on other conditions and circumstances'.⁶⁴

Common sense or *sensus communis* is then something to be valued. The remedy to any frightening loss of common sense, and thus of reality, is, for Arendt, to talk about what we share with friends and by talking make them more common.⁶⁵ This conversation does not mean all will agree, but only that something will become more common to all, that friendships are made stronger as well as our sense of reality. It seems to me that this characterises Murdoch's dialogical philosophy as well as the conversations Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch had. Philosophy – as most intellectual endeavours – can be and has been an alienating activity. That Murdoch was able to redeem some of the outsiders perspectives for philosophy may well be thanks to these conversations.

If this understanding of philosophy as not abandoning common sense or *sensus communis* may not seem all that unusual, I would be glad. Of course, this kind of conversation is not alien to history of philosophy or to current philosophical practice. Yet, it may surprise those people who understand philosophy as a rigid pursuit of truth, as combat between adversaries, which may in its endeavour silence a diversity of voices.⁶⁶ What I hope to have shown is that this silence is not just to the detriment of those voices, but also to the philosophy developed. Why else would we be celebrating the voices of the wartime quartet, if not for their profound contributions?

5. Coda

What is it like to be a woman in philosophy? I hope to have shown that there is not a simple answer to this question, not in general and not in the case of Murdoch. In one interview Murdoch claimed that in Oxford there was no difference: to be a woman in philosophy is to be a man in philosophy. Yet, there is also ample evidence that she was keenly aware of gender discrimination and that she understood philosophy as not value free. Gender also affected her posthumous

⁶⁴ Borren, op. cit. note 58, 247.

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, 'Philosophy and Politics (*Social Research* 71.3 (2004), 427–454), 434–435: 'Friendship to a large extent, indeed, consists of this kind of talking about something that the friends have in common. By talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them.'

⁶⁶ See Dotson, 'Concrete Flowers' op.cit. note 2, on the prominence of the adversarial method.

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image for a while, when she was portrayed for the mind she lost rather than for the novels and works of philosophy that she wrote.

Being a woman in philosophy runs the risk of not being taken seriously as an interlocutor. When those who divert from the dominant discourse are asked once too often whether what they are doing is philosophy, it should not surprise that some of them decide to leave the profession. It is not obvious whose loss is greater, whether it is, as Woolf mused, better to be locked in or locked out, whether, as Dotson puts it, they have failed in philosophy or philosophy has failed them.

Philosophy is slowly becoming a more inclusive discipline, thanks to a growing number of proposals and recommendations. I have argued that to become truly inclusive philosophy needs to rethink its methods, goals and the questions it asks. Dotson is right to argue that philosophy needs a plurality of methods. Inspired by Murdoch and the wartime quartet I have characterised one alternative as 'not abandoning common sense'. This kind of philosophy is a shared investigation of experience. As a shared investigation it is markedly different from the adversarial method and its focus of experience allows us to confirm reality and recognise diversity.

There are good reasons for making philosophy more inclusive. Philosophy is a necessity in some ways and it should be open to diverse voices. The diverse voices, on the other hand, are needed for philosophy. Philosophy should not turn away from the world and from experience, for that should be instead its central concern. The practice of the wartime quartet gives us an inspiring example of what such philosophy may look like. It is a philosophy of people who do not abandon common sense, who have conversations about a world common to them and in those conversations the world becomes more common and more real and their friendships stronger.⁶⁷

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⁶⁷ I dedicate this article to Pamela Sue Anderson, whom I still miss very much. I like to thank audiences in Uppsala, London and Durham for their comments to earlier versions. Thanks also to my colleague Yasemin J. Erden for her careful feedback to an earlier version and for all those years in which we worked together to create and maintain a very good, pluralistic philosophy programme.