



Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy in Iris Murdoch's Novels: A Philosophical and Literary Exploration

Dr. Rashmi Verma

Professor, Dept. of English

Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

India

Abstract: Iris Murdoch, renowned for her dual role as both a novelist and philosopher, challenges modern moral philosophies through her literary works. This research paper examines how Murdoch critiques the dominant ethical frameworks of the 20th century—particularly existentialism, utilitarianism and behaviourism—by integrating her philosophical ideas into the narratives and moral dilemmas of her characters. Analysing key novels such as *The Sea*, *The Sea*, *The Bell* and *The Black Prince*, this paper seeks to reveal how Murdoch advocates for moral realism, the existence of objective goodness, and the importance of attention and moral perception as counterpoints to modern ethical relativism and subjectivity.

Keywords: Existentialism, utilitarianism and behaviourism, ethical relativism, attention, self-transcendence and objective goodness

Iris Murdoch, a prominent British philosopher and novelist, made significant contributions to both the literary and philosophical landscapes of the 20th century. Her dual engagement with these fields allowed her to develop a unique critique of contemporary moral philosophy, which she saw as increasingly dominated by existentialism, utilitarianism and behaviourism. For Murdoch, these modern ethical frameworks failed to address the complexities of human morality, reducing it to either personal freedom, the pursuit of utility, or the conditioned responses of human behaviour. Her novels, while rich in narrative detail and psychological depth, serve as a powerful counterpoint to these prevailing moral theories. Murdoch's works explore the consequences of adopting these modern ethical frameworks, while simultaneously advocating for a return to moral realism and the existence of objective moral values.

Murdoch's critique of existentialism is one of her most persistent philosophical themes. Existentialism, particularly as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, emphasizes radical personal freedom and the idea that individuals create their own values through acts of will. For Murdoch, this focus on self-creation and freedom often leads to narcissism and moral blindness, as individuals become trapped in their own desires and ego-

driven narratives. She saw existentialism as denying the reality of an external moral order, replacing it with subjective value creation. Her novels frequently depict characters, like Charles Arrowby in *The Sea*, *The Sea* and Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince*, who attempt to impose their will on the world, only to be confronted with the moral consequences of their actions. These characters' journeys reflect Murdoch's broader philosophical argument that true morality requires recognition of the Good, a transcendent reality that exists beyond the individual.

In addition to her critique of existentialism, Murdoch's novels also challenge utilitarianism, which she saw as overly reductive in its treatment of moral life. Utilitarianism, with its focus on maximizing happiness or utility, risks overlooking the intrinsic value of individuals and the moral importance of actions beyond their outcomes. In *The Bell*, Murdoch illustrates the limitations of utilitarian thinking through characters, such as Michael Meade and Catherine Fawley, who attempt to calculate the greatest good but fail to recognize the moral complexities involved in human relationships and obligations. By focusing on the consequences of actions, utilitarianism, according to Murdoch, fails to account for the depth of moral character and the necessity of attention to moral issues, which she viewed as essential for genuine ethical engagement.

Murdoch was equally critical of behaviourism and moral relativism, both of which gained popularity in mid-20th-century thought. Behaviourism reduces human actions to patterns of conditioned responses, stripping away the moral depth that Murdoch believed was central to understanding human life. Her novels emphasize the importance of moral perception and self-awareness, rejecting the notion that human behaviour can be fully explained by external stimuli or social conditioning. In works like *The Nice and the Good* and *The Bell*, characters undergo processes of moral awakening, learning to see beyond their immediate desires and habitual responses, thus illustrating Murdoch's belief in the transformative power of moral attention.

Through her fiction, Murdoch offers a sustained critique of the modern moral philosophies that dominated her time, presenting an alternative vision of ethics grounded in the existence of objective goodness. Her novels explore the process of moral growth, often requiring characters to confront their own egos, relinquish control, and attend to the moral realities of the world around them. In doing so, Murdoch's literary work not only critiques the shortcomings of existentialism, utilitarianism, and behaviourism but also offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of moral life. This paper will explore how Murdoch's novels challenge modern moral philosophy, advocating for a return to a vision of ethics rooted in moral realism and the sovereignty of the Good.

Iris Murdoch's critique of existentialism is one of the central themes that pervades both her philosophical writings and her fiction. Existentialism, particularly the version espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre, emphasizes radical individual freedom and the belief that human beings create their own values in a world devoid of inherent meaning. Sartre's famous dictum "existence precedes essence" encapsulates the existentialist view that humans define themselves through their actions, and that moral values are subjective and constructed by individuals. Murdoch, however, found this focus on self-creation and freedom deeply troubling. In her view, existentialism promotes a form of moral blindness, where individuals are trapped in their own desires and disconnected from any external moral reality.

Murdoch's philosophical rebuttal to existentialism is articulated in her essay collection *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). She critiques Sartre for his portrayal of the self as radically free, arguing that this view dismisses the reality of moral constraints and the existence of an objective Good. Murdoch insists that humans are not as free as existentialism suggests; they are constantly shaped by their desires, habits and unconscious motivations. Furthermore, she asserts that existentialism's denial of an objective moral reality leads to solipsism and narcissism. As philosopher Maria Antonaccio notes, "Murdoch's central concern with existentialism is its elevation of individual will and freedom at the expense of moral vision and the reality of the Good" (117).

Murdoch's critique is vividly illustrated in her novel *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), where the protagonist, Charles Arrowby, exemplifies the existentialist obsession with self-creation and personal freedom. Charles retreats to a house by the sea, believing that he can control the narrative of his life and impose his will on others, particularly in his obsessive pursuit of his childhood love, Hartley. His repeated attempts to manipulate her, believing he is free to shape his destiny and hers, echo the existentialist belief in the power of individual will. However, as the novel unfolds, Charles' moral blindness becomes increasingly apparent. He is incapable of seeing Hartley as a person with her own desires and needs; instead, he views her as an object of his ego-driven desires.

Through Charles, Murdoch demonstrates how existentialist freedom can devolve into egoism. His refusal to see Hartley and others clearly is a manifestation of what Murdoch calls moral blindness—the failure to perceive the world accurately because of one's self-obsession. As Charles's world unravels, he is forced to confront the limits of his will and the delusion of his autonomy. As a Murdoch scholar Peter Conradi observes, "Charles' progressive failure is Murdoch's way of showing that existential freedom, when untethered from moral reality, leads not to fulfillment but to moral and psychological disintegration" (73).

Murdoch further explores the existentialist dilemma in *The Black Prince* (1973), where the protagonist, Bradley Pearson, is an aspiring writer who, like Sartre's ideal existentialist hero, seeks to construct meaning and identity through his art. Bradley believes that artistic creation will allow him to transcend the mundane realities of life and relationships. However, his pursuit of an idealized, self-authored existence only leads to his moral downfall. His obsession with the young Julian, whom he sees as a muse, blinds him to the moral obligations he has toward her and others. Bradley's failure to see the humanity in others mirrors Sartre's notion that individuals are radically free, creating their own meaning independent of external moral truths. However, Murdoch shows that this freedom, far from being liberating, leads Bradley to self-deception and the destruction of his relationships.

Murdoch's novels, therefore, serve as a sustained critique of existentialism, particularly its emphasis on freedom and self-creation. For her, the existentialist denial of objective moral values leads to a self-centred worldview in which individuals are unable to perceive the reality of others. As Justin Broackes notes, "Murdoch's characters are often engaged in the process of trying to see more clearly, a process that demands that they move beyond their egoism and recognize the existence of a moral reality that is independent of their desires" (24). In this way, Murdoch rejects the existentialist celebration of freedom, arguing instead for the importance of attention, moral perception and the recognition of the Good as an objective reality.

Murdoch's critique of existentialism is thus rooted in her belief that morality is not a matter of individual will or subjective construction, but of seeing the world clearly and responding to an external moral reality. Her novels demonstrate the dangers of unchecked freedom and the existentialist illusion of self-creation, advocating instead for a more grounded and humble approach to moral life. Through her fiction, Murdoch shows that true moral growth requires not the assertion of will, but the ability to look beyond oneself and attend to the world and others with clarity and selflessness.

Iris Murdoch's critique of utilitarianism and consequentialism—moral theories focused on maximizing happiness or utility—is a central theme in her novels. She viewed these ethical frameworks as reductive, reducing complex moral dilemmas to simplistic calculations of outcomes. Murdoch believed that utilitarianism neglects the intrinsic importance of individual character and fails to account for the moral depth of human life. Her novels vividly depict the limitations of consequentialist thinking, often through characters who try to justify morally questionable actions based on their perceived results.

In *The Bell* (1958), Michael Meade exemplifies the utilitarian impulse. As the leader of a religious community, he justifies morally ambiguous decisions by appealing to the greater good of the group. His concealment of his relationship with Nick, for instance, is driven by a desire to maintain the community's harmony. Yet, Murdoch uses Michael's internal moral struggles to show how utilitarian thinking can obscure the real ethical complexities of personal responsibility and character. As critic Peter Conradi notes, "Murdoch's characters often fail when they try to resolve moral dilemmas with the simplistic arithmetic of utilitarianism, missing the deeper demands of moral vision" (176).

Murdoch's *A Severed Head* (1961) also critiques consequentialist thinking, where characters like Martin Lynch-Gibbon, Antonia and Palmer Anderson prioritize their immediate desires and perceived happiness without considering the ethical implications of their actions. By focusing on outcomes, they engage in self-deception and betray others. As Justin Broackes suggests, "Murdoch uses the failures of her characters to show that moral life cannot be reduced to consequences or happiness—it requires attention to character and moral particulars" (31).

Through these portrayals, Murdoch critiques utilitarianism and consequentialism, promoting a deeper, more intricate conception of morality grounded in individual character and moral attention.

Iris Murdoch's critique of moral relativism and behaviourism is a fundamental aspect of her moral philosophy and fiction. She viewed both approaches as oversimplifying human morality, denying the existence of objective moral truths, and undermining the complexity of human ethical life. Through her novels, Murdoch exposes the shortcomings of moral relativism, which holds that morality is subjective and culturally dependent, and behaviourism, which reduces human actions to conditioned responses.

Moral relativism, which gained prominence in the 20th century, argues that moral judgments are relative to cultural norms or individual preferences. Murdoch believed this view leads to moral apathy, as it denies the existence of an objective moral reality. In her novel *The Nice and the Good* (1968), Willy Kost is an embodiment of this relativist mindset. He acts based on his desires without recognizing any higher moral obligations, drifting through life without any clear sense of right or wrong. Murdoch uses Willy to demonstrate the dangers of relativism, showing that without a commitment to objective moral truths, individuals become

morally blind and unable to engage meaningfully with ethical questions. As critic Maria Antonaccio explains, “Murdoch saw relativism as a dangerous form of moral blindness, cutting individuals off from the moral clarity and responsibility that comes from recognizing objective goodness” (129).

Murdoch also critiques behaviourism, which was popular in mid-20th-century psychology. Behaviourism posits that human actions are merely responses to external stimuli and can be understood through patterns of conditioning. Murdoch rejected this view as reductive, believing that it strips away the richness of moral life by ignoring inner moral struggles and the importance of moral perception. In *The Bell* (1958), Dora Greenfield’s journey from a self-absorbed young woman to someone capable of moral reflection illustrates the inadequacy of behaviourist thinking. Initially, Dora’s actions are driven by immediate desires and social pressures, but over time, she learns to engage with the world through deeper moral attention. As critic Peter Conradi asserts, “Murdoch’s characters often escape the mechanistic constraints of behaviourism through the development of moral perception, learning to see beyond their conditioned responses” (27).

Murdoch believed that both moral relativism and behaviourism deny the possibility of genuine moral growth. For her, moral progress involves a process of unselfing, where individuals transcend their desires and conditioned behaviours to see the world more clearly. This requires attention to the reality of others and the recognition of objective moral truths. By embedding these critiques in her novels, Murdoch argues for a more nuanced understanding of human morality, one that acknowledges the complexities of moral choice, personal responsibility, and the existence of objective goodness.

Iris Murdoch’s novels serve as both literary works of art and philosophical critiques of the dominant moral theories of her time. By embedding her philosophical concerns in the lives of her characters, she offers a profound critique of existentialism, utilitarianism, behaviourism, and moral relativism. Murdoch advocates for a moral realism grounded in attention, self-transcendence, and the recognition of objective goodness. Her works challenge modern moral philosophy to consider the depth and complexity of ethical life, urging a return to a more robust understanding of morality that is grounded in the reality of the Good.

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