AN INTERVIEW WITH IRIS MURDOCH

S. B. Sagare

The following interview took place during August 1987 at Iris Murdoch’s home in Oxford.¹

SAGARE: To begin with, I’ll take your statement from "Vision and Choice in Morality": "Great philosophers coin new moral concepts and communicate new moral vision and modes of understanding" (42). Will you please explain this?

MURDOCH: I think this is a characteristic of the history of philosophy, that philosophical progress depends on great geniuses who appear at different times, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, and later Hegel, Wittgenstein. Philosophy depends more than other studies on great metaphysical visions. This is just part of the history of human thought that these visions do occur from time to time and then exert a very great influence, so that was what I was referring to.

SAGARE: You say that the great novel is shaped by the vision of the artist—I mean, "a novelist should have a view point of mature morality" ("Sublime and Beautiful Revisited" 257). Will you please elaborate?
MURDOCH: This seems to me true of the great novels; of course, one recognizes the great novel by many different features about it: that it is a well made story, that it has lively characters, that it has an interesting point of view, is beautifully written, and so on. I think the fundamental thing which a great novel can’t be without is a kind of moral vision, an ability of the writer to judge justly his own general attitude to his society and attitude to his characters. This is what must be deep, must be just, and must be compassionate. The presence of these virtues, the ability to see thing in perspective also implies an ability to express what is funny in the right sort of way. These are things which great novelists do, though of course, when you look at the great novelists, very often they seem in terms of style and attitude very different from each other, but I think they have this sort of great humanity in common.

SAGARE: Now, do you think that there is a similarity between a philosopher and a novelist?

MURDOCH: No, I don’t. They are quite different operations. I think it’s very dangerous if a novelist attempts to express a philosophy or definite theory in a novel. The traditional novel is a place where people live in all kinds of different ways, where different kinds of characters meet, where it’s the deep aspects of human life that are being spoken of and not an abstract theory. Philosophy is very difficult; it is a very different kind of thought, in an essential sense, abstract. Writing a novel involves being plunged into all the details of human life.

SAGARE: What is your view of life? Is it optimistic?

MURDOCH: Well, it’s hard to say. It’s pessimistic in many ways. I think that human beings are very much given to selfishness. It’s a part of human nature to be selfish; it’s difficult to overcome this, to overcome egoism and the ruthlessness that people feel when their interests collide, and of course international politics at the moment don’t look very cheerful. I think, however, that I am also an optimist. I believe in the importance of virtue, of love, of trying to lead a good life, of trying to change oneself and society for the better. These are difficult goals, but I think that there is a kind of hopeful idealism which always returns to human beings.
SAGARE: Why is your view of the world not very optimistic? Do you mean that we are all liars, deceivers, or that humanity is not improving?

MURDOCH: Human arrangements have improved enormously. If one thinks of even the last hundred years or so we have made things very much better. Certainly, in Western society and in other societies too, we have better attitudes—to women, to children, to people of other races, and to homosexuals. I think people sometimes are too pessimistic to see this, but there is a great deal of goodwill which has been injected into our societies. Things do still get better, and although one may, for instance, think the United Nations is not of much use, its existence is very important. It is a place where people of different nations, instead of failing to understand each other or fighting each other, can get together and discuss things. So I am pessimistic about human nature only in the sense that I think it is very difficult to stop being selfish.

SAGARE: You have said that the key to your fiction lies in some kind of discovery about the reality. You have also said that “all the novels represent a kind of journey from appearance to reality” (“An Interview” 4). Does this theme underline your fiction? Could you elaborate?

MURDOCH: I think that this is a very general theme of literature. A novel is a drama about people who are in some kind of confusion or illusion but are seeking enlightenment, freedom, seeking happiness of course, which we all seek, and the novel describes a drama which ends in catastrophe, falling back into illusion, or acquiring greater illusion or becoming more sensible, more enlightened or more free or something of this kind. I think that there’s a struggle between good and evil which exists in the traditional novel and that is fundamentally what it is about, but then this is just to say that the novel is a general picture of human life.

SAGARE: You have said that your first ambition has always been to write a realistic novel in the manner of such nineteenth-century writers as Dickens or Tolstoy (“An Interview” 5). Is that still true? How do you hope to accomplish that?

MURDOCH: Oh, it’s impossible; I can’t accomplish it. I can’t write novels like the people you have mentioned—Dickens or Tolstoy or Dostoevsky
or Proust, the people I admire deeply. I am afraid I can’t, but I can try, and these are ideals. If one is writing a traditional novel, it is important to read these great works again and again because they can inspire one and help one to write a better book.

SAGARE: You have said that people have improved their behavior now. Do you find这些 changes because of the influence of your novels?

MURDOCH: Good heavens, no. I think that if they read my novels, it would have a small influence, if any. No, I think that this is something which comes into being some mysterious way. Social change does come about because of the pressures exerted in society by well intentioned people, and it is right that society should be free and open as your society is and as our society is. All kinds of different groups want to improve things, perhaps just local things, and do make changes, and gradually these changes become expressed in laws or in customs or in patterns of great generality in the society. This is how change takes place, and I doubt whether novels have much influence. The social work of individuals in groups is more influential.

SAGARE: Do you have any ambitions of altering the society you live in? If so, what do you want society to become?

MURDOCH: If I worked more in politics I might be able to have more influence, but I don’t feel that is my job. I want to go on being an author and a philosopher. There are many things one might want to do to bring about a political system which has more harmony, less conflict in it. But this is a dangerous idea because it suggests a one party state where there is harmony because people are forced into harmony! This, of course, is not what one wants in your country or in this country. We have political parties with different points of view and a certain degree of conflict is essential. But I wish that, say, in England, there could be more harmony in the ends which are pursued by political parties and not so much conflict, whereby one lot destroys the work of the other lot. I think in general that the kind of justice which I mentioned earlier—justice to women and overcoming racial tensions, and so on—is very desirable and has not yet fully come about.
SAGARE: How do you feel you started as a novelist? I mean, did you start with any particular intentions?

MURDOCH: No, only with the intention to write novels. When I was a child I wrote stories and thought of myself as a storyteller. Being a philosopher was something that happened to me much later on. I liked writing stories; I liked reading stories. It is just a natural function.

SAGARE: Do you think of yourself as a novelist or a philosophical novelist?

MURDOCH: Not a philosophical novelist, no, certainly not—just as a novelist. Philosophy, as I said earlier, is quite a different matter.

SAGARE: When did you know that you wanted to be a writer? Was it Under the Net?

MURDOCH: Oh, no. I knew I wanted to be a writer when I was about nine years old. I had no doubt about that. My father was a very literary man. He was in the British Civil Service. He wasn’t himself a writer, but he loved novels and stories so that I was reading novels when I was very young indeed. I probably read my first novel as soon as I could read, almost. And one of the first novels I read was Kim, a wonderful novel which gave me a very strong sense of India which I have had ever since, so that I feel it is a place that I am at home in. I’ve visited India twice, and I have always felt a particular bond with your country. So you see how deeply a novel can influence somebody! But this was just in answer to your question about how early did I have these feelings: I had them very early.

SAGARE: What were the themes of earlier novels which were not published?

MURDOCH: I can’t remember. I think they were themes which are similar to the ones in my published novels.

SAGARE: Do you find being a writer difficult?
MURDOCH: Yes. I think it’s very difficult to be a good writer, which is what I want to be. I don’t find writing difficult; I mean, some people say the actual action writing, of composing sentences, is burdensome to them. That’s not my problem; I mean, I can write fluently. I have no problem in composing sentences and paragraphs and writing them down. The difficulty is to construct the novel; the fundamental construction of the novel is the really difficult part. Just how the plot works and how the characters are realized, made into real people, is the difficult bit, and I spend very much time on that. I don’t write the first sentence until I’ve planned the whole novel in great detail.

SAGARE: Do you consider writing a pleasure or hard work or both?

MURDOCH: Well, both. It is certainly a pleasure. But, of course, when it goes badly, when you feel you’re writing badly, that you can’t get things clear, then this of course is depressing, but, yes, it is hard work.

SAGARE: Do the ideas for your novels come to you the way you might want poetry to come to you?

MURDOCH: It’s different from poetry. I have written verses at different times and even published some, but I am not really a poet. I think I don’t know how real poetry is written. I expect it does come out of the air, as it were, much more than is the case of the novel. Of course, as with any work of art, in the case of the novel, ideas just do occur “out of the air,” and at any given moment one’s head, or my head, anyway, is full of all sorts of embryonic ideas of stories and situations and people and so on. The problem is to collect them and work them into a scheme. The more one works, the more ideas come, and if you can invent a good character then the character will invent things for himself, as it were. So it is partly a matter of waiting for inspiration and being patient.

SAGARE: When you write, do you have a specific reader in mind?

MURDOCH: No, just readers; no particular kind of reader.

SAGARE: Do you aspire to be considered a great writer, one whose works will stand to the test of time?
MURDOCH: Of course; I want to write well. It is difficult to know what will survive. Writers who were famous at one time are often forgotten later.

SAGARE: For example?

MURDOCH: To take an example, a recent one—Have you read anything by Charles Morgan? Have you heard of Charles Morgan? Well, in the 1930s he was perhaps the most famous of all English novelists; he was very well known. He was very popular in France, too, and may still be, for all I know. But now he has disappeared. Clever critics of the time said that Charles Morgan is a marvelous novelist, his work will last, and this fellow called Evelyn Waugh, his frivolous stuff will vanish, and the opposite has taken place. Evelyn Waugh survives and Charles Morgan doesn’t, so this is very hard to predict. Of course, the situation may be reversed again later on.

SAGARE: What do you believe to be your best novel?

MURDOCH: Oh, I don’t know. I think the later ones are better than the earlier ones. That, of course, is what any writer wants to think because one likes to feel one is getting better and not worse! But I do think that the long later novels—say the last five or so, or six—are the best ones, but I don’t have any particular one in mind.

SAGARE: In an interview with Malcolm Bradbury you have said that Under the Net was a juvenile, derivative book. Could you please explain this?

MURDOCH: It’s juvenile, I think. Two writers I admired very much of that time were Raymond Queneau, a French writer, and Samuel Beckett. But actually the novel isn’t like either of them, though I might have wished it to be. It’s a freak novel, and my other novels don’t resemble it very much. It’s sort of childish—there’s a lot of childish merriment and jeaux d’esprit and so on in it. I think it is quite a decent novel. It’s not that I would want to obliterate it, but I think it lacks the maturity and the ability to construct in a more complex way, which I learnt later on.
SAGARE: You have responded to Olga McDonald Meidner (446) that you did not mean Calvin’s speech in *The Flight of the Enchanter*—“you will never know the truth, the truth lies deeper, deeper” (278)—as the final word on the subject.² If it is not the moral of the novel, then what is?

MURDOCH: Sorry, what did you say was supposed to be the moral of the novel? I would need to see the context. Of course one can often know truth; I don’t know what these words mean out of context, and I don’t know that one could say what the moral of the novel is. I think that it is very difficult to say of any complicated novel what the moral is. I mean, there isn’t any one moral, but there is a moral atmosphere and a moral construction.

SAGARE: Is it your favorite novel?

MURDOCH: Which one?

SAGARE: *The Flight from the Enchanter*.

MURDOCH: Good heavens, no. It has never been my favorite novel. That’s my second novel and also an immature novel. Of the early novels, the only one I like really is *The Bell*. I think *The Bell* was the first good novel that I wrote. Still, I mean, they are all novels, all individuals, and they differ from each other in a variety of ways. *The Bell* was the first one in which I thought that I managed to do anything which was really worth doing.

SAGARE: How do you distinguish your concept of freedom from your doctrine of love. You said “to be free is something like this: to exist sanely and without fear and to pursue what is real” (“Darkness” 50).

MURDOCH: Well, yes. I mean, I think freedom and love are concepts which interconnect. What one means by “physical freedom” is another thing. I mean, one may be free “in one’s soul” as it were, but may be imprisoned by circumstances, or literally imprisoned, unable to leave one’s country or whatever, but that’s another sense of freedom. Spiritual freedom is connected with the idea of love. To love is to respect and to attend and be unselfish, to withdraw yourself and let other things exist, and this is also a state of freedom. The opposite of freedom in this sense
would be being relentlessly driven by selfish urges or by cravings or
being a drug addict or alcoholic: somebody who, while realizing that they
didn’t really want to be like this, have to be like this. The same occurs in
extreme passions, such as being in love; I mean, when this is not real love,
which would be respect or attention and justice and so on, but a driving
desire to have your own way. Ambition can be like this, too. The contrast
is between a state of being enslaved to selfish urges or being more open
and calmer, more able to understand what is surrounding one. This would
be a different freedom which would also involve compassion and feel-
ings of affection and of wanting to live for other people. But this is a
difficult achievement.

SAGARE: You have said that your political convictions are left wing, but
your aesthetic theories in essence seem to be conservative. Is it still
ture? I mean, do you hold a position comparable to unilateralist-liberal
and pro-labor positions?

MURDOCH: No, I don’t. I used to; I don’t now. I don’t think I have any
aesthetic theory as such, but I certainly have very strong views about
what’s good and bad in art. I would not describe my views as conserva-
tive. I can describe these as far as the novel is concerned as traditional
because I think the traditional novel is a very important form, but I don’t
mind people writing other kinds of novels. In a free world they can write
good novels in other forms and good luck to them, so I wouldn’t use the
word conservative. In political views in the ordinary sense I have cer-
tainly moved to the right; i.e., I don’t think I could vote for the present
Labor Party. But it may very well change. I’m not an extreme leftist. I
used to be a Marxist, but I am certainly not a Marxist now, so if I have
moved slightly I have moved to the right.

SAGARE: Do you think that communism has no future?

MURDOCH: Well, I hope it hasn’t. If by communism one means a regime
like those that have existed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe
generally. This communism deprives people of freedom and is economi-
cally very bad for the countries, too. But of course one must hope, and
now there is hope because of Gorbachov and the differences and re-
markable changes which have been taking place in Russia and which I
hope will go on in due course, to take place in other Eastern European countries. One was perhaps too pessimistic when one thought that Eastern Europe would never change; it is changing, and I hope will change.

SAGARE: How do you feel now as a novelist? I mean, your feelings when you started as a novelist and after writing twenty-two novels—do you feel any change? Will you say that there was a turning point in your writings? Has there been any change of style, say, from your first book to your latest one?

MURDOCH: There’s been a change of style only in a very general sense. I think that I write better, though the early books are perfectly well written! I think I have good English style, but the complexities of writing have become greater, and I hope successfully so, in the later novels. I don’t know whether there was any particular turning point. I think The Bell is a sort of oddity—the novels written just after The Bell probably were not as good. I don’t think I’d mark any particular turning point. The later novels, the six or so, are the best.

SAGARE: All the earlier novels, I find, have anthropological, mythological, and philosophical dimensions. But the later novels are less philosophical—why?

MURDOCH: Well, I don’t think I’d agree with that: mythology is a different matter from philosophy. There are references to philosophy in the novels. There is a kind of philosophical dimension in Under the Net concerning the difference between someone who can articulate his thoughts and someone who thinks that silence is in some ways better than speech. But it connects deeply with the story of the novel and the characters of the people. I would not call the earlier novels philosophical, no. On the question of mythology, I think this can be rather overdone. There are mythological patterns in some of the novels, or symbolic patterns if you like—such as in The Unicorn, for instance—but these patterns are not allegories. I don’t think I write anything like allegory or satire or anything of that sort. The mythology, if you like, is made by the people in the novel themselves connected with the characters and is not something which dominates the story or explains the story. There are certain general patterns—for instance, the idea of an ordeal: somebody has to undergo
an ordeal in order to become enlightened or to understand or even to succeed. But this is something very general. I don’t think the novels are ruled by detailed mythologies in any kind of conventional sense.

SAGARE: There are some hidden connections coming through, especially French, in the earlier novels, which are missing in the later. Why?

MURDOCH: Connections? Absolutely none. I mean, I’d like to be influenced by Proust. I don’t on the whole like French novels, except for Proust. I find Flaubert and Stendhal quite alien. The kinds of novels that I feel at home with and want to be like are the traditional English novels and the Russian novels. I’d very much like to resemble Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev. I think a mixture of all three of them would be ideal. And I would certainly like to be influenced by Proust, but he is the only French writer that I feel akin to.

SAGARE: Do you think that you are writing in a particular tradition? Are you conscious of it?

MURDOCH: Yes. I’m writing in the tradition of the English and the Russian novel, which is a great tradition, and, I think, a recognizable one. I think the English novel is much closer to the Russians than to the French.

SAGARE: Do you think that there is ambiguity in your novels, and, if so, in which?

MURDOCH: There is ambiguity in all novels. I mean, it is part of the atmosphere of human life that you have contrary feelings, or you have contrary explanations, or you don’t really know what other people are like. You live in doubts and conjectures and change your mind. It is part of the human situation that things are ambiguous. But I think a novelist has a difficult task, that of suggesting ambiguity but not, as it were, cheating by leaving the reader absolutely in the dark. I think novelists do this instinctively. They have an indication, a signpost, which goes on through the novel whereby you are shown roughly who is telling the truth and who isn’t, and who is good or less good, and in what direction the decent people are striving and in what direction the ill-intentioned people are striving. In all this, there’s bound to be a certain amount of ambiguity, so
that one isn’t quite sure perhaps how to judge a character. And one may not even know exactly what happened, but on the whole I think the traditional novelist would give you a good many orientations and signals.

SAGARE: Are you true to yourself, and is that self ultimately androgy-nous?

MURDOCH: You mean people generally, or me? Well, people go on about how every man has a female aspect, every woman has a male aspect. I don’t know that this takes one very far: I mean, I think that we’re all individuals, that scientific generalizations of this sort are not very valuable. I feel very strongly about the liberation of women, and I think the main aspect of this is that women should not study their female personalities or regard themselves as superior to men in some respects because they are women or separate themselves. That’s just back to the old ghetto of being separate from men, and doubtless wonderful, but inferior! Women should realize that they are ordinary individuals just as men are, and that they must do what they can, develop their talents and make themselves into whole people and this is something that any human being must try to do, and the fact that you are man or woman doesn’t make it a different task. This task is the same for both of them. Women will have become really liberated when they are just to be found everywhere in society as writers, as politicians, as scientists, in business and so on. Also as priests!

SAGARE: On several occasions you have said that we need a satisfactory liberal theory of personality—in your words: “the theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn” (“Against Dryness” 18). Could you please elaborate?

MURDOCH: If only the idea of human nature which animated politics generally were effectively something along those lines! But how exactly a society can be filled with such persons is not clear; and of course a free society is a muddle, a mix up, full of confusions and different aspirations, and an important thing about liberal politics is that liberal politicians don’t imagine that they can or should change this and produce complete harmony. I don’t think this can happen, and I think it is a very important
idea in politics to say that it is not going to happen and one has got to expect and deal with conflict, as we were saying earlier. But one should have this "idea" of human personality, which is important and is understood in democracies.

SAGARE: Do you mean that we have lost moral behavior also?

MURDOCH: Well, we never had it. I think people behave better now then they did in the past, as I was saying, in numerous ways. There seems to be more violence because we try to control it more. There was a great deal of uncontrolled violence—if you think of all the violence against women and so on—that went on quietly in the past, which perhaps is now slightly less. I think the past was a rotten place and the present's not much good either in these respects, but one can just hope that in all sorts of small ways the society does actually improve. People talk a lot now—and this might be behind your questions—about sexual permissiveness. I think this is certainly something that one would want to watch. Again, as is so often the case, this particular permissiveness works out much worse for women. I think that promiscuous sex is bad, rushing from one person to another without love or respect. But I think that people have realized this lately and are more conscious of it, perhaps, and more reflective.

SAGARE: It is a fact that liberals have never fought for truth: they do not talk about virtue. How can truth go with liberals?

MURDOCH: I don't know quite what you mean by "liberals." Liberalism in politics is connected with democracy, and people who are democrats should speak the truth and are able to do so. Truth is fundamental in a society and liberal minded people have always wanted an open society and truth telling and a free press, which, after all, is concerned with finding things out and telling the truth. I should have thought that liberalism would go with truth telling.

SAGARE: "Liberal" in the sense of liberal theory of personality

MURDOCH: Let me put it this way: in England whether you belong to the Labor Party or the Conservative Party, you are liberal in politics—that is you are democratic; that's all really it means now in that sense. So that all
well-intentioned people, using a vague phrase, would be liberal—that is they would want a free society and that people should not be interfered with in certain ways. Of course, any society interferes with people in some ways: they make people drive on the left side of the road, for instance, or right side, as the case may be, etcetera, etcetera, but we go on holding a balance between what society can do to people, what it can't do, and this is where the ideas of liberalism remain very important.

SAGARE: How can morality, rules, and truth have a place in permissive society?

MURDOCH: I think easily. "Permissive society" is a journalistic phrase and refers generally to a kind of sexual permissiveness that has come into being in the last thirty years, say, some of which is good. For instance, it used to be the case that if a woman had an illegitimate child, she was very much frowned upon, and the child was persecuted. This doesn't happen now or not to the same extent, and this is good. I mean, there's a kind of good permissiveness as well as a kind of bad permissiveness. People are more tolerant of each other—nobody thinks of it as a terrible disgrace, as it used to be, to be divorced and so on: there is a good kind of liberalization of society. On the other hand, as I was saying, if it also means that people are promiscuous and don't care what they do sexually, then I think that's a bad thing. There is good and bad.

SAGARE: Do you feel it is easy to find the truth in a framework of untruth?

MURDOCH: I wonder what you mean by "framework of untruth." Do you mean a social framework? Obviously, the fundamental assumptions of the society, the habits and conventions of it influence people. These things often take a long time to change. I mean that if people grow up thinking that homosexuality or divorce is wicked or that an illegitimate child is a disaster and so on, these ideas may persist, and this might be called from our point of view or my point of view a part of the framework of untruth. But, then, truth is always fighting, and the fight for truth can be successful—I mean, again and again, in all sorts of different ways, and when untruth has been established, truth has come back again.
SAGARE: As you said, the essential nature of man has been neglected and misunderstood. Do you think that he must be ready to incur responsibility?

MURDOCH: Over a very long period we have developed this idea of the human individual as having rights, as being something to respect, and of men and women as having the same rights and so on. It has taken a long time to achieve this and the achievement is precarious. Not every country recognizes human rights.

SAGARE: How can we have rules within a framework of permissiveness?

MURDOCH: Responsibility is an aspect of freedom. You are responsible for yourself, for your actions, and towards other people. The idea of the free human individual hasn’t existed all that long, and there are countries today in which people, especially women, are virtually slaves. This represents a view of human nature which I think is wrong, morally wrong, and which one hopes will gradually disappear. I think we might helpfully distinguish between permissiveness—meaning sexual promiscuity—and tolerance. It is good to be tolerant, bad to be promiscuous. This is a rough general guide! Moral values have to find their way and their definitions amidst the confusions and developments of a free society.

SAGARE: We have talked about human freedom and love, but what about responsibility? And so what about duty?

MURDOCH: This is fundamental. One can’t conceive of society or ordinary human life without the idea of duty. We recognize very general duties such as the duty to tell the truth, although at times it may be our duty not to. This is a matter, as I mentioned above, of moral roles having to be defined and redefined in social contexts. Duties can conflict or cease to be accepted as duties. For instance, our general notion of woman’s duties has changed. We no longer (in England) think of women as necessarily subservient to men.

SAGARE: Do you think that god was never dead?
MURDOCH: Well, I don't believe in a personal god and neither do the majority of people in your country, but they believe in religion. Buddhism and Hinduism are great religions, and people observe them, and this is something that struck me very much in India, seeing how much religious observance there is. Religion is everywhere, and I think this is good, but one can certainly be religious without believing in the Judaeo-Christian god who is thought of as a person. I don't believe in any such person, and I don't believe in another place heaven or anything like that, or in life after death—I think it is all happening here. I hold a view very much like that of the Buddhists and, I imagine, of sophisticated Hindus. What is your religion?

SAGARE: Hindu.

MURDOCH: Well, I think that these are great religions and in some ways more enlightened than Christianity because Christianity traditionally demands beliefs in certain historical facts. I think that Christ should be regarded in Western Christianity as Buddha is regarded in Buddhism or Krishna in Hinduism—as a great mystical figure who represents goodness, spiritual aspiration, change, enlightenment, and so on. In the West, people worry about historical details: who was Christ; did he rise from the dead, or is there a personal god? Well, I don't think Christ rose from the dead or that there is a personal god, but I think that religion is fundamental to human life, and I hope very much that it will continue. Religion is always changing itself. Christianity has always been changing; the theology of Christianity changes, and I hope it can change itself into something that people can believe in and which can help them to be good, which is the fundamental objective of religion.

SAGARE: Would it be correct to say that god's aliveness was proclaimed much more than his death, that a powerful assertion of the living god gave testimony through claims about the death of god?

MURDOCH: "The death of god" is a phrase connected with Nietzsche, and I think that all that means is that the old personal god is dead, but people who go around claiming that god is dead are usually people with high ideals and some new idea of religion which they then want to substitute for the old one, so that I don't think there's any special drama
about god being dead. Some people try to demythologize Christianity using this type of phrase and try and persuade other people that the Christian truths are not literal things and that the Bible is not a literal story and that we should realize that when we speak of god we are not speaking of some supernatural individual. This change, which I think is important and right, is not easy.

SAGARE: Do you think that a liberal theory of personality is the answer to solve the problems of the present day?

MURDOCH: Yes, I think so. At least it may help to solve some of the problems! We should hold a view of the individual which treats him as worthy of respect and someone who needs freedom and someone who is supposed to be compassionate and just and so on. He is to be respected and must respect others. I think that it is very important to keep this idea alive and to spread it around the world, for instance in the form of the conception of human rights. School education should emphasize this value.

SAGARE: You have said, "it is a novelist's job to be a good artist and that it involves telling the truth and not worrying about social commitment" ("Iris Murdoch" 60). Will you please elaborate?

MURDOCH: I think that it is an artist's first job to be a good artist and not to feel that he has to serve his society. In some countries the artists are told that they must serve their society and not worry about the details of their art in terms of their own personality but write about the revolution or about what good citizens ought to do. This is an atmosphere that some artists in Eastern Europe have had to undergo. I disapprove of this: I think that every artist should decide for himself how best he can work. I think he must try to work well and to produce the best art that he can produce. Some artists may feel particularly drawn to a social commitment and feel that this is part of their art or whatever they want to do, and so, good luck to them—but I don't think that generally artists should be told that they have to serve their society. In fact—and this is important, too—if artists produce good art, they are probably serving their society. They are revealing truths about it, for instance. Good art is connected with truth and enlightenment.
SAGARE: In an interview given to W. K. Rose you have said you were not able to present characters with enough depth and ordinariness and accidentalness. Your aim was of “starting to invent the novel and then abolishing the central characters?” (“Iris Murdoch” 65). Do you think that you have succeeded in doing so now?

MURDOCH: Well, I can’t remember this interview with Rose. That was a long time ago. The idea about abolishing the central characters was really a kind of joke in a way. I didn’t mean that literally I would do this but that very often a novelist may find that the minor characters have more individuality than the central characters though they may be more simply presented so they may perhaps, in a sense, only just seem to be more individual because they’re more idiosyncratic and peculiar. But if one thinks of Dickens’s minor characters, how wonderful he was at making the smallest character into an individual; this is very enviable and one would like all one’s characters including the central ones to be idiosyncratic and special individuals! Proust is very good at this, too: he can make a minor character into somebody who’s highly memorable.

SAGARE: Do you think that Plato had a Greek view of god—I mean, of religion?

MURDOCH: It is difficult to know exactly what Plato thought about religion. He certainly didn’t believe in the Olympian gods or in our personal god. He believed in spiritual goodness—the idea of good—as a guiding reality. I think that this is like what we were just talking about, what is found in Buddhism and Hinduism, and one hopes that Christianity may be able to develop this idea, too. Religion is a mystical vision of goodness. I think Plato is one of the most religious of all thinkers, and he is one of the greatest.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the British Council, Mumbai, India, for arranging and sponsoring my stay in the United Kingdom under its Visitorship Scheme.

2. During a conversation with Rosa, Blick makes a pronouncement that, on first reading, seems to sum up the “moral” of the novel. In having used the
photograph of Rosa and the Lusiewicz brothers to blackmail both Hunter and Rosa, Blick says that no "power" existed in such a mechanical device as a photograph. And then he adds: "You will never know the truth, and you will read the signs in accordance with your deepest wishes. That is what we humans always try to do. Reality is a cipher with many solutions, all of them right ones . . . I have done nothing for you and brother but provide you with rather grotesque pretexts for doing what you really want to do. The truth lies deeper, deeper. It is always so" (278).

Works Cited

———. "An Interview: Iris Murdoch in Conversation with M. Bradbury." Interview with Malcolm Bradbury.