Iris Murdoch, Moral Perception, And Virtue Ethics

PhD Seminar with Niklas Forsberg

Genoa, January 28-29, 2019

Under the auspices of the Northwestern Italy Consortium for PhD Program in Philosophy (FINO)

Seminar Schedule

Jan 28

Philosophy library seminar room – via Balbi 4, 1st floor

10.00 -10.15 Registration and opening remarks

10.15-11.45 Lecture 1: Perception and Prejudice: Elucidating attention and moral progress in Iris Murdoch’s philosophy through a reading of C. S. Lewis’s ‘A Grief Observed’

11.45-12 Coffee break

12.00-12.30 Student presentation 1: Paolo Babbiotti, A Problem of Style: Sharpening Vision

12.30-14.00 Lunch – MenteLocale cafe, via Balbi 8a

14.00-15.30 Lecture 2: Try Walking in My Shoes: On the Limitations of Empathetic Readings of Literature

15.30-16.00 Student presentation 2: Lotte Spreeuwenberg, Love as a verb: the missing aspect in contemporary Kantian accounts of love

Free time/Genoa tour (weather permitting)

18.00 aperidinner – Jalapeño tapas bar, via della Maddalena 52r

Jan 29

Philosophy library seminar room – via Balbi 4, 1st floor

10.15-11.45 Lecture 3: The Virtues of Perfectionism and The Imperfections of Virtue Ethics

11.45-12.00 Coffee break

12.00-12.30 Student presentation 3: Matilde Liberti, Action-guidance in Aristotelian Ethics

12.30-12.45 Concluding remarks
Abstracts

Lecture 1

Perception and Prejudice:
Elucidating attention and moral progress in Iris Murdoch’s philosophy through a reading of C. S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*

**Abstract**
It might seem intuitive to say that *attention* is a matter of looking really closely at something, zeroing in on a particular object. In contrast to such an understanding of attention, I will argue that attentive understanding of particular persons, things or events can only be apprehended by means of attending to the *world* in which they belong.

Iris Murdoch’s example of M and D is often described as a clear illustration of what “attention” is. I argue that the example is rather unhelpful, precisely because we get no description of the *work of attention*. So, there’s a big hole in the argument. The strategy of this paper is to fill that hole by means of a reading of C. S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*. Here we get a clear view of another person is attained by attentive understanding of the world together with the unearthing of one’s own prejudices – a view shared by Murdoch, but missing in the reception of her thought.

**Recommended Readings**


Lecture 2

Try Walking in My Shoes:
On the Limitations of Empathetic Readings of Literature

**Abstract**
In contemporary debates about the philosophical relevance of fictional literature, particularly narrative novels, the question about how something fictional can have cognitive bearing on something real has been ascribed a central place. One stance that appears to offer a way out of the quarrel between so-called “cognitivists” (that think that literature has real cognitive value) and “anti-cognitivists” (who think it doesn’t) has been advanced by Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum has argued that reading literature often is a better way to find an answer to the question “How should one live?” than reading moral theories. The general idea is that literature, by being open to particularity of human existence, *shows* us something about the human condition that abstract and theoretical rules or principles cannot do. What this is supposed to achieve is a widening of our perception; our sensibilities in
general and sympathetic understanding in particular. Also, literature is deliberately emotional whereas philosophy tends to evade emotionally charged responses and expressions, and these evasive maneuvers result in a distortion of our moral reality. By reading literature, one may learn, for example, what a particular way of like “feels like” as it were. We need to learn how to feel what the characters of the novel feels. But then one immediate question arises: What if we learn to feel like bad characters do? And what if we learn to really appreciate that feeling? Nussbaum is not unaware of this problem, and hence she has been forced to dub such forms of literature “deficient literature.”

I will argue that this difficulty does not show us that there are two kinds of literature (edifying and deficient), but that there is something fundamentally confused with the idea that the philosophical value – it’s cognitive merits, as it were – can be reduced to us readers feeling what the characters in a novel feel. I discuss some problematic aspects of Nussbaum’s understanding of the philosophical value of turning to literature. More specifically, I critically examine the idea that the philosophical importance of literature is to be found in “the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person” as Nussbaum says. Many of Nussbaum’s reflections upon issues concerning the philosophical value of turning to literature are both important and highly insightful. Nussbaum is evidently right to argue that literature sometimes is of great philosophical and argumentative value because it provides helpful images of our emotional lives. However, I aim to make clear that there are several problems with her view that are rooted in the way she gets to that conclusion, and how certain philosophical and methodological commitments of hers make her view unnecessarily reductive and limited.

I will also discuss ways that literature may be seen as of great “cognitive value” even though it does not straightforwardly “hook onto the world” (the demand that cognitivist and non-cognitivist quarrel about), but which neither can be reduced to the “feeling what it is like” view. The key here is to acknowledge that literature may be philosophically instructive quite regardless of any supposed “philosophical content,” in the sense that it can reveal to us how our conceptual world is formed. In a sense, literature’s strength is that it is so like our everyday lives in language and so unlike philosophy. One might say that it is often (but not always) the clash between the realistic picture of our world represented in a work of art and our philosophical expectations that make philosophy ‘happen,’ that invests the literary work with its profound philosophical significance.

Recommended Readings


Lecture 3

The Virtues of Perfectionism and the Imperfections of Virtue Ethics

Abstract

Several scholars who attempt to pigeon-hole Iris Murdoch’s philosophy describe it as a variation of “virtue ethics.” I will argue that this is rather unhelpful – for two reasons. First, I don’t think Murdoch’s philosophy lends itself that easily to compartmentalization. Secondly, even if one were to persist and aim to categorize her thinking nevertheless, the label “virtue ethics” is a poor choice. In my talk, I will focus on the concept of “perfection.”
Commentators that present her as a virtue theorist of a Platonist kind, often suggest that Murdoch argues that there is such a thing as “the good” out there, not unlike Platonic pure forms, that we should strive to realize or perfect (or, alternatively, apprehend knowledge of). Murdoch’s use of “perfectionism,” thus organized by the thought structures of virtue theory, supposedly implies that there is something that is identifiable as the good that we are to aim for.

I argue, in contrast, that when Murdoch talks about perfectionism, it is absolutely crucial that one realizes that her view is that perfection is unattainable, never realized. Moral perfectionism, rightly construed, importantly starts off from, and depends entirely upon, an idea of human imperfection. And it must be seen as an examination of human imperfection rather than as an attempt to define and defend an ideal.

Moral perfectionism focus more on questions about what kind of person I am, or can and might want to become, and what kind of vision I have of my (our) future, than on explicit moral choices and overtly moral situations (that what is common in much contemporary moral theorizing. Moral perfectionism is a form of thinking that is not ordered around any given “thing” and does not offer a temple for how to act.

Finally, I will address the question about how to place Murdoch’s perfectionism in relation to other theories that are action-guiding (like most varieties of utilitarian and deontological theories are, and that many versions of virtue ethics also aim to be): does this place Murdoch’s philosophy outside the current discussions about how philosophy ought to guide our actions (that is, is she completely changing the subject), or does her philosophy entail that we reconsider philosophy’s ambition to be action guiding at a more fundamental level?

Recommended Readings


Students’ Presentations

1. Paolo Babbiotti, *A Problem of Style: Sharpening Vision*

This contribute is based on Bernard Williams' idea that the aim of moral philosophy is to "sharpen perception", that is, to "make one more acutely and honestly aware of what one is saying, thinking and feeling". A similar position was held by Iris Murdoch, who however focused on perception as vision. In her philosophical work, this task is fulfilled also thanks to the use of examples (think of M and D in The Idea of Perfection): they are characterized by a narrative and expressive style, capable of capturing the emotional flows that pass through the minds of people and that help to shape their inner visions.

The aim of sharpening perception was linked, according to Williams, to a more general problem of style concerning moral philosophy. Sharpening vision seems, in the same way, to pose a problem of style and to question the idea that philosophical style is something neutral. In *A Critique of Utilitarianism* Williams had built two examples, those of George and Jim, which were not only functional to his argument, but played a deeper role. We can assume that also for Murdoch examples played a similar role, which, if properly understood and analyzed, may be able to contradict the thesis that supports a supposed neutrality of philosophical style.

2. Lotte Spreeuwenberg, *Love as a verb: the missing aspect in contemporary Kantian accounts of love*

Contemporary accounts of love are often written against the backdrop of a Kantian conception of human lives and morality. This paper argues that something is missing in these contemporary accounts of love. While love can be understood in many ways, at least one aspect of it is to understand love as a verb: loving is taking up an attitude of hard work – and this is important for love being central to our moral lives. By putting contemporary Kantians, like David Velleman (1999), in conversation with Iris Murdoch (1971), this paper shows that the notion of love as a verb is missing from such Kantian accounts. However Velleman claims to be inspired by Murdoch, he fails to take in an important aspect of love that Murdoch seems to point out when she is talking about love as attention. Instead of portraying love as a contingent feeling experienced by a passive agent, we should regard it as an active attitude that one can take up.

References:


3. Matilde Liberti, *Action-guidance in Aristotelian Ethics*

This paper addresses the problem of action-guidance in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, according to which we are not told how to act, but rather what sort of person we should be, which leaves us with no substantial instruction when faced with hard cases. I start by introducing McDowell’s particularist reading, according to which the virtuous person sees the right course of action in every situation she is faced with. There is no need for general moral principles to function as action-guiding (which is not to say that they do not exist at all), because if we are virtuous we will always know what to do. I then argue that this interpretation is not accurate and that general moral principles do play a significant role in action-guidance in Aristotelian ethics. In order to support my argument I first consider Book V, where Aristotle briefly accounts for ‘equity’ as what corrects the inevitable
omissions of the process of applying universal laws to particular cases, and then Book II, where Aristotle mentions ‘perception’ as what allows the virtuous person to hit the right mean when doing so implies deviating from the target. In both cases I argue that McDowell’s particularist interpretation fails to account for the fact that general moral principles provide action-guidance, and that it is not the case that the virtuous person sees an answer that is already particularised in the situation itself; rather, the virtuous person will see the principles as action-guiding, but will find a way to apply the universal moral principles to particular cases, exactly in the same way the adjudicator will bend the limits of law in order to re-interpret them in accordance with the particular hard case.
People

Organizers
Maria Silvia Vaccarezza
University of Genoa – Aretai Center on Virtues
mariasilvia.vaccarezza@unige.it

Angelo Campodonico
University of Genoa – Aretai Center on Virtues
campodonico.angelo@gmail.com

Participants
Paolo Babbiotti, FINO consortium - paolobabbiotti@gmail.com
Amerigo Barzaghi, FINO consortium - amerigobarzaghi@yahoo.it
Dario Cecchini, FINO consortium - ceccodario@gmail.com
Francesco Emanuelli, MA Unige - emanuellifrancesco@gmail.com
Carola Isaia, MA Unige - isaia.carola@gmail.com
Matilde Liberti, MA Unige - libertinmatilde@yahoo.it
Valeria Meazza, MA - valeria.meazza@gmail.com
Elena Ricci, MA Unige - elenar781@gmail.com
Damiano Simoncelli, FINO consortium - damiano.simoncelli@gmail.com
Lotte Spreeuwenberg, University of Antwerp - lottespreeuwenberg@gmail.com