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Metaphysics As A Guide To Morals (Penguin Philosophy)



Synopsis

The decline of religion and ever increasing influence of science pose acute ethical issues for us all. Can we reject the literal truth of the Gospels yet still retain a Christian morality? Can we defend any 'moral values' against the constant encroachments of technology? Indeed, are we in danger of losing most of the qualities which make us truly human? Here, drawing on a novelist's insight into art, literature and abnormal psychology, Iris Murdoch conducts an ongoing debate with major writers, thinkers and theologians—from Augustine to Wittgenstein, Shakespeare to Sartre, Plato to Derrida—to provide fresh and compelling answers to these crucial questions.

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Customer Reviews

British novelist-philosopher Murdoch's treatise on contemporary morality spans such topics as Shakespearean tragedy, Martin Buber's philosophy and the nature of the imagination. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book is about the interplay of metaphysical images in art, religion, and especially morals. Morality is fundamental to human nature and is to be understood, according to distinguished novelist and philosophy professor Murdoch, not merely in piecemeal analysis but in the broad synthesis of metaphysical categories that set the order and pattern of our moral experience and our concepts thereof. Moral discernment comes from concentrated attention and appears ex nihilo, as

by a kind of grace that leads us from contingent detail toward a perfection that we (allegedly) know intuitively. The work draws significant influence from Plato and Kant and also discusses aspects of Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, and Buber in detail. Far-ranging and rich with well-chosen examples, this insightful book challenges us to think more clearly about its subject.- Robert Hoffman, York Coll., CUNY Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

(The 1st most important work is Whitehead's "Process and Reality;" taken together, the "200" year frame is quite possibly overly conservative.) Murdoch does not present us with a metaphysical "theory." Rather, she presents a comprehensive argument about the nature and purpose of metaphysical *inquiry*. It is impossible to overstate the significance of such a shift in emphasis. Murdoch carefully leads the reader through a study of metaphor, because the deepest metaphysical truths are the sorts of things that cannot be directly articulated. Whitehead is also clear on this point, a fact that many of his interpreters cheerfully disregard. But Murdoch goes well beyond Whitehead's brief defense of speculative philosophy, and argues for the necessity of "spiraling in" (my phrase) to ideas that are real asymptotically, but only ever ideal within the finite limits of human cognition. Hence the need for metaphor to approach which always hovers just over the horizon of what human thought and speech can formulate. Each successive phase of metaphorical expression takes another step in closing in upon a never achieved, "infinitely receding," center of an idea that we feel and sense, but can never quite say. (Plato's "Symposium" exemplifies this procession of metaphors, by the bye.) But what makes Murdoch's work so especially important is that she does not merely argue for this point, she *exemplifies* it in her successive development of metaphors, stories, and analyses. She does not simply tell us that this is how metaphysical inquiry is done, she *SHOWS* us in the very doing of that inquiry. Having mentioned Whitehead already, the example that comes to mind is of mathematicians who present us with the completed results of their inquiry (and Whitehead was, of course, a mathematician as well as a brilliant philosopher) in the form of theorems and proofs, but do not exhibit the full process *OF* that inquiry to we sad fools trying to follow their line of argument. Murdoch -- and to my knowledge, *ONLY* Murdoch -- explicitly peels back the curtain on that process of inquiry. Anyone with even a casual interest in philosophy needs to read this book, in order to understand how to do philosophy well.

'Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals' is as the title suggests. It is metaphysical in spirit and

philosophical in style. The subject is one of many of Iris Murdoch's themes. Mostly she likes to help us find meaning in our lives by elevating our moral sensibility. She does that quite well. However, her style is not for everyone as it is heavy to read. One must decide the topic has relevance or that it has intellectual worthiness to engage in its minute and often ponderous arguments in favor of her thesis. Good people lead spiritually more gratifying lives than, well, the opposite, I guess. That would be those who are not so good. But then there are good people and there are the really 'Good' people. The really good are those who have transcended their contradictory inclinations for the path set out by Murdoch. Murdoch's thesis is that 'Good', is above being, non-personal, non-contingent, not a particular thing among other things'. For Murdoch, moral consciousness and reality testing are synonymous. In a world where pretense is often the sine qua non of one's existence, healing our vision is a lifelong journey. Why not take this fine book along as your guide? I have, and I'm a better person for it. So I imagine!

The book addresses a broad array of themes, such as Wittgenstein, Kant, and Derrida, all from the standpoint of moral inquiry. Like one reviewer says, (I'm paraphrasing) the book is a little scatterbrained, but has a lot of insight condensed within each section. I found one section that provides some potential background for my own dimensional philosophy in this book. It's usually a good sign when a work has real ties to one's own theories, thoughts, and beliefs. To a very discerning standard, this book is on the verge of being disappointing, but significantly passes over the hump by providing considerable thoughtfulness on every subject related to the central theme.

It is dense and not very interesting.

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