Existentialists and Mystics
Iris Murdoch
Edited by Peter Conradi
Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, $37.95

by Elijah Millgram

Three of the essays in this career-spanning collection make up Dame Iris Murdoch’s The Sovereignty of Good, a little classic which I regularly assign in my ethics courses. When I do, some of the students who have been impressed by it pick up one or another of her novels, and of those students, some, by now predictably, come back to ask whether the novel and the philosophical treatise are really by the same author. What my students are noticing is not simply the simultaneous living out of two rather different literary lives, but a problem in a unified project that we are at last in a position to understand as philosophical throughout, now that we have on hand a retrospective of Murdoch’s overtly philosophical work. Almost all of her short nonfiction is included, as well as two Socratic dialogs; with the sole exception of “The Fire and the Sun,” it is tight, graceful writing, and a pleasure to read.

The early essays, reviews and broadcasts show Murdoch finding her footing in an intellectual landscape, now startlingly distant, where Sartre and Marxism were the visible alternatives to a dry Oxford moral philosophy that presented itself as the analysis of ethical language. Having noticed that the overdramatic French and the underdramatic English had much more in common than their devotees appreciated, she somewhat confusingly applied the label “existentialism” to both. The shared feature which Murdoch’s unusual nomenclature highlights is the focus on the moment of choice that, forty years later, is still characteristic of the Kantian and utilitarian moral traditions. (Along with a revived Aristotelian interest in virtue, these today make up the mainstream of thinking about ethics.) But focusing on the will—on choices, decisions, and intentions—is, Murdoch thinks, a mistake.

Murdoch’s central insight is that the hard part of figuring out what to do is coming by the right description of your situation: of the people in it and their needs, of your own motivations, of the action you are considering, the consequences it will have, and so on. So practical reasoning is a matter of substituting better descriptions for worse. A stuffy older woman begins by seeing her daughter-in-law as “lacking in dignity and refinement... pert and
familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile.” Careful and honest reflection replaces this characterization with another: “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful.” With the right—or wrong—description in place, one’s mind is all but made up, and one’s deliberations are all but over. Action, if any is called for, will follow naturally, almost automatically, as will consequences of one’s altered view that are more subtle than overt actions: the mother can cease to resent her son’s marriage, and her comportment towards her daughter-in-law can become genuinely open rather than merely outwardly correct. The deliberative and moral work required for right action comes well before the actual decision, here, in the complex task of seeing another person as she really is.

The traditions Murdoch is trying to displace would not deny that, in order to do a good job of figuring out what to do, you have to see your situation correctly, and that this is not always a trivial accomplishment. But these traditions distinguish facts from values, and construe getting such descriptions right as just reasoning about the facts, and so not as practical or moral reasoning properly so-called. They assume that the evaluative task begins once the value-free descriptive input to it is all in place. Murdoch finds this assumption untenable. “Perception itself,” she tells us, “is a mode of evaluation.” We see what we take to be worth noticing. In describing our circumstances, we deploy concepts that already mix fact and value (recall “vulgar,” “undignified,” and “delightfully youthful”), and, as philosophers like Hilary Putnam and Bernard Williams have emphasized, it is not realistically possible to peel apart the factual and evaluative sides of such characterizations. More delicately, even the attempt to segregate the two is the expression of a particular system of values, rather than a neutral preliminary to decision.

So successful practical reasoning is substantially a matter of arriving at satisfactory descriptions of our situations. (A fact that, once pointed out, is obvious, but, as Murdoch has remarked, philosophy is often a matter of finding occasions on which to say the obvious.) What we are going to get out of this fact depends on just what the process of substituting better for worse descriptions looks like, and at this point Murdoch has some surprising claims to advance. First, that process is endless; there is no final description that cannot be improved upon. Second, great art is a model and an instance of this moral task performed well, because great art shows things as they really are. Third, to come closer to seeing things as they really are is to see them more and more idiosyncratically; moral progress is progress away
from the shared public world into private vision and, presumably, mutual unintelligibility. And fourth, as we move on to better descriptions, we see connections among apparently disparate values, and at the limit of the series we can almost make (though never quite see) all values unified into the Good, which is not God but is all we should really have wanted Him to be.

Her claims are bold enough taken one by one; for instance, not all art seems to be a matter of showing things as they “really are.” (Abstract art, which Murdoch briefly and opaqueley considers, is an especially troublesome case.) And it is still harder to see how her claims could be true together. If our respective visions diverge as they (and we) improve, how can they show us the convergence of values on a single, coherent Good? Great art, which we have been told shows things as they really are, often seems to exhibit the disunity rather than the unity of value: Greek tragedy, it is sometimes said, shows us the dispareneness and incommensurability of the things that matter to us. Why then, should we believe Murdoch on these points (among others)?

Murdoch’s essays are notable for their lack of traditional philosophical argumentation; the support her views need will not be found in Existentialists and Mystics. But the claim that the point of art in general (and novelistic art in particular) is to show us things as they really are indicates that Murdoch’s very successful novels are meant to be her arguments. Because good art displays what things are like, it is a way of presenting one’s experience (though, when it is fiction, it need not record one’s actual experiences), and Murdoch insists that experience, “combed through,” will support her claims.

I think the strategy is promising. Novelists, after all, can be especially practiced at finding the description that rings true. We should allow Murdoch to argue for her preferred technique of practical reasoning by using that very technique. Her investigation of a notion of truth that is broader than “accuracy” — that can be applied to fictions, where truthfulness is not a matter of being an accurate copy—is worth pursuing. But, and here we come back to the startling contrast repeatedly noticed by my students, Murdoch’s novels are not written in a way that would allow them to bear out her views.

Truth, in fiction, is contrasted with wish-fulfillment, sentimentality, fantasy, self-indulgence—in short, with daydreaming. On Murdoch’s philosophical view, art aspires to be a form of attention to those things from which one would most rather avert one’s gaze: only when art is not escapist fantasy could it amount to argument for the hard-to-swallow claims we were looking at a moment ago. So it is important that Murdoch’s novels are bought
largely as escape literature; as far as their consumers are concerned, they are daydreams, and it is difficult to believe that they were not daydreams for their author as well.

By way of example, take The Italian Girl, published in the sixties, when Murdoch was doing her strongest philosophical work, and not, in the relevant respects, atypical. There are the elements out of which the plot is constructed: Otto is keeping an exotic Russian mistress; the mistress’s brother has been sleeping with Otto’s wife and teenage daughter, and the daughter is pregnant; the maid has had an affair with Otto’s now-deceased mother, and the will leaves the house to the maid; Edmund (Otto’s brother, and the narrator of the story) assaults his niece, resists the advances of his sister-in-law, chases his brother’s mistress through the grounds, and the mistress’s brother around the niece’s bedroom. After all this, one feels that one has been immersed in a soap opera: not an attempt to “really look,” but rather an artistic collusion with the reader’s desire to be distracted, that is, not to “really look.”

Or again, there is the novel’s happy ending: the Oedipal pairing off of its narrator-protagonist with the domestic servant who raised him; the discovery that the house was not burned down after all, and that the maid will let the family keep the estate; the convenient death of the mistress, of course by accident; the daughter returned and Otto’s wife, happily pregnant, off to start a new life; the symbolically cracked boxwood blocks “all healed... quite sound and whole again.” All the loose ends are tied up with an implausible—and, more importantly, comforting—neatness. But in her essays, Murdoch tells us that “really looking” means seeing chance and necessity and death, which she is contrasting with, among other things, the comforting neatness of a happy ending.

There is more along these lines to be said about The Italian Girl, and about many of Murdoch’s other novels; most of them must, by her own lights, be counted as consoling fantasy rather than as truthful art. (Some will require more complicated assessments than this one, and of course some of the novels are quite good, even if they do not live up to their author’s official standards.) Murdoch may have been trying to produce daydream-like novels; her fiction is especially good at showing how her characters see their surroundings, and they, like ourselves, are supposed to see mostly daydreams rather than surroundings. But if the effect is intentional, it is not thereby less of a problem: the novels can do their philosophical job only if they give us something other than daydreams, however convincingly rendered.

Whether of the traditional or the novelistic variety, satisfying arguments for her claims would have to start out from a much more substantial charac-
terization of how one goes about replacing one description of one’s situation by another, better description. What Murdoch has to say here is that the hard part is getting the fat, greedy self out of the way: for instance, seeing past one’s jealousy to the person one’s child has married. This is no doubt an important piece of the problem, but it cannot be the whole story. Even after I have gotten rid of the emotionally convenient distortions, there will often remain a further question as to the right way to look at things. It is, in any case, not enough of the story to underwrite her more ambitious metaphysics: to show, for instance, that values are unified in the Good, and that, in the Platonic imagery that grows stronger in the later essays, the Good illuminates the moral world as the sun illuminates the natural world.

These reservations notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to dismiss Murdoch’s attempt to redirect moral theory. She does herself an injustice by presenting her philosophy as Platonic: it is her own, and it is a noteworthy accomplishment. Return for a moment to her view that successful descriptions are idiosyncratic. This claim is responsible for her almost exclusive focus on moral perception and quality of consciousness. If the results of practical reasoning done right are as unique, individual and private as Murdoch takes them to be, there is not much to be had by way of a compendium or summary, retrospective or anticipatory, of those results: no rules about what (not) to do, no lists of goals or rankings of consequences. What remains as the subject of moral theory is the improvement of the discerning intelligence that makes connections, sees past its self-aggrandizing fantasies, and habituates itself to humility. The great moral traditions have addressed themselves to different first questions, and Murdoch follows suit. Utilitarianism asked: What is to be pursued? Kant asked: What ought I to do? Aristotle: What kind of person should one be? Murdoch’s moral theory asks, and it is by insisting on this question that it has a real claim to our attention: How should I see?