PHIL 3910 / 5910
Spring 2026
Wednesdays 3:10–5:30pm
Classroom: Furman 106

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Iris Murdoch
&
20th-Century Philosophy

Course Description

This seminar will explore the philosophical writings of Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) by focusing on her engagements with key figures of twentieth-century philosophy. Our approach shall be to study Murdoch's writings not in isolation but as a kind of tapestry into which multiple traditions in twentieth-century thought are woven: from the Oxford philosophy of G.E. Moore and Gilbert Ryle to the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir; from the religious mysticism of Simone Weil to the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud. Most weeks we will proceed by reading a pair of texts in conversation with one another: one by Murdoch and one by one of her interlocutors. The exception to this rule will be several weeks throughout the semester in which we will explore writings of Murdoch's that engage in modes of expression beyond philosophy, including her first novel, *Under the Net*, a play written in the form of a Socratic dialogue, "Art and Eros," and a selection her poetry. Themes will include: the relationship between thinking and language; privacy and inner life; the fact/value distinction; the (in)definability of the Good; existentialism and free will; selfishness, egoism, and fantasy; moral change; the role of love in ethics; analogies between art and morality; and the possibilities for ethics after the death of God.

Course Texts

The following texts have been ordered to the Vanderbilt Bookstore. Please obtain a physical copy of each:

1. Simone de Beauvoir. 1976. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road).
2. Iris Murdoch. 1999. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Penguin).
3. Iris Murdoch. 1977. *Under the Net* (London: Penguin).
4. Simone Weil. 2002. *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge).

Course Assignments

Reading Notes

One of your principal week-to-week commitments this semester will be in the form of response posts. Eight times during the semester you are required to write a short response to one of that week's assigned readings. You can post more than the required eight times for extra credit (see Specification Grading policy, below). You can post anytime during the week, but the week "closes" at 5 p.m. on Fridays. The structure for the Reading Notes each week is as follows:

- In three to four sentences, sum up a central point or idea that the author is trying to communicate, and how the text is structured so as to communicate it (as if you were writing a brief abstract of the text on behalf of the author).
- In two to three sentences: what was the most illuminating, helpful, or insightful part of the reading and why?
- In two to three sentences: what is one pressing question you have about the reading?

Final Paper

Your capstone project in this class will be a thesis-driven research paper on Iris Murdoch that engages primarily with texts assigned in this class but also incorporates secondary literature (see reading "Further Readings and Resources" at the end of this syllabus). The length requirement is 2,000 to 2,500 words for those enrolled in this class at the undergraduate level and 4,500 to 5,000 words for those enrolled at the graduate level.

One of the aims of this class is to encourage the idea that writing is an iterative process in which revising is essential. To accomplish this goal, rather than having a single final paper due at the end of the semester, you will be required to engage in an extended paper-writing process with the following three components:

1. *Initial Submission*. A full, initial version of your paper is due on **April 8**. Note that this is *not* a "rough draft," but a full, proper paper (i.e., it should be proofread, include full citations, have a beginning, middle, and end, etc.). This version of your paper will be returned with comments by **April 15**.
2. *Lightning Talk*. During one of our final two sessions, you will give a brief, five-minute spiel presenting your main thesis and argument to the class. A more detailed description of this assignment will be shared later in the semester.
3. *Revised Submission*. A revised version of your paper that takes into account my initial feedback is due on **April 29**. Major revisions/additions should be highlighted either in bold or yellow.

Specification Grading

This course aims to inspire deep engagement with readings, assignments, and discussions without over-emphasizing grades. As a result, your work on major assignments will be evaluated as "meets expectations" or "does not yet meet expectations." Assignments will not receive letter grades (A/B/C/etc.), although you will receive a final letter grade at the end of the semester (see the table below).

The wording of the categories "meets expectations" and "does not yet meet expectations" is intentional. This course aims to cultivate a learning environment in which you feel comfortable taking risks and see learning as an incremental process. Expectations will be high because you are capable of meeting high expectations with appropriate support and effort.

Do not take "does not yet meet expectations" as a sign of failure. It's not equivalent to an "F"! It means that there is potential for you to take instructor feedback and revise your work, thereby meeting expectations at a school like Vanderbilt. Indeed, this is the point of all your classes—not to be perfect from the beginning but to engage in, even struggle with, the work of the course and to improve along the way.

By the end of the semester, you will have earned a final letter grade, which will be based on the following factors:

	A	**B**	**C**	**D**
Reading Notes	8 meet expectations	7 meet expectations	6 meet expectations	5 meet expectations
3 Final Paper Components *	3 meet expectations	2 meet expectations	1 meets expectations	None meet expectations
Participation	Meets expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester

***** Three Final Assignment Components = Final Paper Initial Submission, Final Paper Lightning Talk, Final Paper Revised Submission. All three assignments must be submitted/completed in order to receive a passing grade.

Additional Notes on Specification Grading Policy

1. Each grade bundle (the columns on the table above) is jointly required to receive a grade in that range. All specifications in a bundle must be met in order to earn that grade. In other words, the lowest level you complete in each category sets the ceiling for your grade. For example, if you earn 2 "meets expectations" out of three on your Final Paper Components, you cannot earn more than a B+ in the course, even if you have otherwise

completed most of the A bundle.

2. Students may earn a "plus" on a letter grade by demonstrating exceptional growth, engagement, exceeding expectations on assignments, or showing special commitment to the course, including by writing extra Reading Notes or revising an essay that already received a "Meets Expectations." A student may earn a "minus" by consistently meeting only the basic requirements of coursework, by showing little evidence of growth over the semester, submitting late work, or repeated violations of classroom policies.
3. Participation includes being clearly prepared for and engaging in class discussions and seizing opportunities to learn, collaborate, and find support. It requires (but goes far beyond) attendance. Excessive absences (see the policy below) can result in failure in the course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Participation will be evaluated at the end of each unit, at the same time that your major papers are returned to you with comments. Students who do not meet expectations on participation must meet with their instructor to revise their participation goals and be re-evaluated later in the term. Particularly excellent or particularly poor engagement in the course can earn a plus or minus on the letter grade at the end of the semester.

Revisions Policy

As you can see from the grading policy above, your assignments will fall into one of two categories: "meets expectations" or "does not yet meet expectations." Any assignment that falls into the second category can (and should) be revised so that it meets expectations. The deadline for revising response posts is *one week* after receiving feedback. Revisions on the Final Paper are required for all students. If your Initial Submission received a "Does Not Yet Meet Expectations," it is possible for your revision to raise that initial assessment to a "Meets Expectations."

Classroom Policies

Attendance. Attendance is essential for doing well in this course. You may miss one class without question and without negatively affecting your final grade. After two absences, your contributions to class will be considered below "meets expectations," unless you have a legitimate, instructor-accepted excuse. Especially excessive absences can result in failure in the course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Whether you are present or not, you are responsible for all materials covered in class.

Reading Assignments. You should have the reading assignment for each day finished by the time our class meeting begins. Always bring the assigned reading and your notes to class, since we will often spend significant portions of our discussion working through important passages, and it will be imperative that you have the material in front of you.

Food and Drink. Please do not eat in class. Drinks are fine.

Laptops, Phones, and other Electronic Devices. This semester we'll enjoy a *screen-free classroom*. The goal is to promote lively conversations in which we are fully present, confident that we have one another's attention, and are able spontaneously to react to each other and the reading in the moment.

In accordance with this policy, please: (i) bring physical copies of the texts to class; (ii) take notes either on paper or low-tech writing tablets that are grayscale and lack web-browsing, email, messaging, etc.; and (iii) leave your laptops, tablets, and phones silenced in your bag (not in your pocket and not on the seminar table). If you have reason to request an exception to this policy, please let me know.

AI, Plagiarism, and the Honor Code. Turning to AI text-generation tools can all too easily degrade the quality of a student's learning experience in thinking through the material for themselves and creating their own work. It also tends to result in subpar writing, at least for the sort of writing you will be asked to do in this class. As such, use of generative AI is not permitted for the writing in this class. This prohibition includes not only the creation of paper drafts, but also its use in the planning stages of writing (such as constructing an outline, considering objections, searching for and incorporating secondary literature) through to the editing and revising stages (if you need a second set of eyes on your paper to go over your style, grammar, or spelling, swap drafts with a friend, a classmate, roommate, etc., rather than running your paper through AI).

Beyond that, all students are expected to complete the course requirements while fulfilling the Vanderbilt Honor System. Information on the Honor System can be found here: www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/the-honor-system/. All cases of plagiarism or cheating will be handled through the Undergraduate Honor Council, and depending on severity may result in failure of the assignment, failure of the course, suspension, or expulsion.

Accommodations and Accessibility. We encourage any students with accommodations needs to submit requests for accommodations in accordance with the guidelines set out by Vanderbilt's Center for Student Access Services. Information, including the "Reasonable Accommodations Request Process," can be found here: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/student-access/.

Religious Holidays. Students who expect to miss classes or any other assignments as a consequence of their religious observance should provide us with notice of the dates of religious holidays on which they will be absent in the first two weeks of the semester.

Reading Schedule

Part I. Early Writings (1948–1963)	
	"The question is, can I really exploit the advantages (instead of as hitherto simply suffer from the disadvantages) of having a mind on the borders of philosophy, literature, and politics—all bloody doubtful." ~Iris Murdoch, Letter to Raymond Queneau, 17 October 1947
1/7	Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Chap. I & III Iris Murdoch, "Thinking and Language" (1951)
1/14	Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Chap. IV & X Iris Murdoch, "Nostalgia for the Particular" (1952)
1/21	G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903), Chap. 1, "The Subject Matter of Ethics" Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics" (1957)
1/28	Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), Parts I & II Iris Murdoch, "The Existentialist Hero" (1950)
2/4	Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), Part III Iris Murdoch, "De Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*" (1950)
2/11	No Class — Use the extra time to make sure you finish the full novel assigned for our next meeting.
2/18	Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (1954)

Part II. Developing an Ethics of Attention (1962–1971)	
	"We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central." ~Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'" p. 337
2/25	Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946) A.J. Ayer, "Jean-Paul Sartre" (1961) Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality" (1956)
3/4	Stuart Hampshire, "Disposition and Memory" (1962) Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection" (1962)
3/11	No Class – Spring Break
3/18	Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (1947) Iris Murdoch, "Knowing the Void" (1956)
3/25	Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1925) Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Chap. III, V, and VI Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'" (1969)
4/1	Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts" (1967)

Part III. Beyond Philosophy and the Novel: Murdoch as Playwright and Poet	
"Good art accepts and celebrates and meditates upon the defeat of the discursive intellect by the world. Bad art mispresents the world so as to pretend there is no defeat." ~Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 88	
4/8	Iris Murdoch, *Art and Eros: A Dialogue about Art* (1980/1986)
4/15	Iris Murdoch, *Poems from an Attic* (1936–1995), selections

Further Readings and Resources

Scholarly writing on Iris Murdoch is vast, in large part because her work has been taken up from multiple perspectives: by philosophers, literary theorists, and intellectual historians of the mid-twentieth century. Murdoch was also a public figure whose personal life has been subject to many biographical treatments, from memoire to film. What I provide here is only a fraction of what is available. The following list is concerned less with being comprehensive and more with providing some touchstones that may prove useful as you work through the assigned material in this course.

General Introductions to Murdoch's Philosophy

1. Maria Antonaccio. 2000. *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford).
2. Larry Blum. 2022. "Iris Murdoch," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/murdoch/.
3. Justin Broackes. 2012. "Introduction." In: Justin Broackes (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford).
4. Mark Hopwood. 2025. *The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch* (Routledge).
5. Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood. 2022. "Introduction." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
6. Heather Widdows. 2005. *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (Routledge).

Commentaries and Guides on Specific Texts

7. Hannah Marije Altorf. 2022. "How to read *Acostos:* Murdoch's Platonic dialogues." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
8. Justin Broackes. 2022. "How to read *The Sovereignty of Good*." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
9. Lesley Jamieson. 2023. *Iris Murdoch's Practical Metaphysics: A Guide to Her Early Writings* (Palgrave Macmillan).

Murdoch in Relation to Other Figures and Traditions

10. Richard Moran. 2012. "Iris Murdoch and Existentialism." In: Justin Broackes (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford).
11. Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge). (See the chapters in "Part 3: Critical Encounters," which includes chapters on Murdoch's relation to: Plato, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, Weil, Wittgenstein, and Løgstrup.)

Ethics

12. Carla Bagnoli. 2003. "Respect and Loving Attention." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 33(4): 483–518.
13. Carla Bagnoli. 2012. "The Exploration of Moral Life." In: Justin Broackes (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford).
14. Lawrence Blum. 2012. "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy." In: Justin Broackes (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford).
15. Sophie Grace Chappell. 2022. "Inwardness in Ethics." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
16. Christopher Cordner. 2022. "Love." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
17. Bridget Clarke. 2012. "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception." In: Justin Broackes (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford).
18. Cora Diamond. 1996. "'We Are Perpetually Moralists': Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value." In: Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago).
19. Cora Diamond. 2010. "Murdoch the Explorer." *Philosophical Topics* 38(1): pp. 51–86.
20. Julia Driver. 2012. "For every Foot its own Shoe: Method and Moral Theory in the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch. In: Justin Broackes (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford).
21. Julia Driver. 2020. "Love and Unselfing in Iris Murdoch." In: Anthony O'Hear (ed.). *A Centenary Celebration: Anscombe, Foot, Midgley, and Murdoch. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 87 (Cambridge).

22. Anil Gomes. 2022. "Moral Vision." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
23. Mark Hopwood. 2017. "'The Extremely Difficult Realization that Something Other than Oneself is Real': Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency." *European Journal of Philosophy* 26(1): 477–501.
24. Sabina Lovibond. 2022. "The Varieties of Attention." In: *Essays on Ethics and Culture* (Oxford).
25. Sabina Lovibond. 2022. "The Elusiveness of the Ethical: From Murdoch to Diamond." In: *Essays on Ethics and Culture* (Oxford).
26. Sabina Lovibond. 2022. "Iris Murdoch and the Quality of Consciousness." In: *Essays on Ethics and Culture* (Oxford).
27. Martha Nussbaum. 1996. "Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Eros and the Individual." In: Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago).
28. Silvia Caprioglio Panizza. 2022. "Attention." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
29. Francey Russell. 2026. "Moral Psychology as Soul Picture." *Philosophical Quarterly* 76(1): 301–319.
30. Kieran Setiya. 2013. "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of the Good." *Philosophers' Imprint* 13(9): 1–21.
31. Robert Stern. 2022. "'How is Human Freedom Compatible With the Authority of the Good?' Murdoch on Moral Agency, Freedom, and Imagination." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 122(1): 1–26.
32. Charles Taylor. 1996. "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy." In: Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago).

Aesthetics

33. Anil Gomes. 2013. "Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53(3): 321–337.
34. Scott Shushan. 2025. "Recognizing Others Through Art." In: Matthew Congdon and Thomas Khurana (eds.), *Recognition: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives* (Routledge).

Language

35. Niklas Forsberg. 2013. *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (Bloomsbury).
36. Niklas Forsberg. 2022. "Thinking, Language, and Concepts." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).

Politics

37. Lucy Bolton. 2022. "Murdoch and Feminism." In: Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge).
38. Gary Browning. 2024. *Iris Murdoch and the Political* (Oxford).
39. Bridget Clarke. 2025. *Iris Murdoch* (Cambridge).
40. Nora Hämäläinen. 2015. "Reduce Ourselves to Zero? Sabina Lovibond, Iris Murdoch, and Feminism." *Hypatia* 30(4): 743–759.
41. Sabina Lovibond. 2011. *Iris Murdoch, Gender, and Philosophy* (Routledge).

Religion

42. Franklin I. Gamwell. 1996. "On the Loss of Theism." In: Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago).
43. Stanley Hauerwas. 1996. "Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get Through Them if God Does Not Exist?" In: Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago).
44. William Schweiker. 1996. "The Sovereignty of God's Goodness." In: Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago).
45. Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (eds.), *The Murdochian Mind* (Routledge). (See the chapters in "Part 4: Art, religion, and politics," which includes chapters on Murdoch's relation to: Christianity, Buddhism, and Jewish thought)

Studies of Under the Net

46. A.S. Byatt. 1994. *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch* (Vintage). Chapter 2, "Under the Net."
47. Peter J. Conradi. 1989. *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (Harper Collins). Chapter 2, "*Under the Net* and the Redemption of Particulars."
48. Miles Leeson. 2011. *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (Continuum). Chapter 1, "Murdoch's Earliest Work and the Existential."
49. Sabina Lovibond. 2011. *Iris Murdoch, Gender, and Philosophy* (Routledge). Chapter 3, "Men, Women, and Learning: Case Studies in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch," pp. 48–52.

Biographies

50. John Bayley. 1999. *Elegy for Iris* (Picador).
51. Peter Conradi. 2001. *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (Harper Collins).
52. A.N. Wilson. 2003. *Iris Murdoch as I Knew Her* (Arrow Books).

Intellectual Histories

53. Nikhil Krishnan. 2023. *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy and War at Oxford, 1900–1960* (Random House).
54. Benjamin Lipscombe. 2022. *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics* (Oxford).
55. Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachel Wiseman. 2022. *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life*. Chatto and Windus.

Other Murdoch-Related Projects

56. *The Iris Murdoch Society.* A scholarly society dedicated to Murdoch. Information can be found here: https://irismurdochsociety.org.uk/
57. *The Iris Murdoch Research Centre*. Located at the University of Chichester in the UK. Hosts an international conference on Murdoch every two years.
58. *The Iris Murdoch Podcast*. A podcast hosted by Miles Leeson, featuring episodes on many aspects of Murdoch's life and work, including many helpful thematic episodes on her philosophical writings.
59. *The Iris Murdoch Review*. A yearly publication devoted to Murdoch's philosophical and literary work. Currently in its sixteenth volume.

Some Recommended Additional Philosophical Works by Iris Murdoch

60. Iris Murdoch. 1953 [1987]. *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* [includes a new 1987 author's introduction]. London: Vintage Books.
61. Iris Murdoch. 1958. "A House of Theory." In: *Existentialists and Mystics*.
62. Iris Murdoch. 1959. "The Sublime and the Good." In: *Existentialists and Mystics*.
63. Iris Murdoch. 1959. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited." In: *Existentialists and Mystics*.
64. Iris Murdoch. 1961. "Against Dryness." In: *Existentialists and Mystics*.
65. Iris Murdoch. 1966. "The Darkness of Practical Reason." In: *Existentialists and Mystics*.
66. Iris Murdoch. 1976. *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*. In: *Existentialists and Mystics*.
67. Iris Murdoch. 1978. "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee." In: *Existentialists and Mystics*.
68. Iris Murdoch. 1992. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin. [this is a sprawling and difficult text; see me for specific chapter recommendations.]