A novelist and a philosopher faces the long-standing problem: 'We ... have tended to regard art as a great spiritual treasury. Why did Plato, who had before him some of the best art ever created, think otherwise?' (pp.1-2). The classic statement of Plato’s objection to art is in Republic 2, 3 and 10; art is destructive of morality, and far removed from what is real. The artist produces eikasia, ‘a state of vague image-ridden illusion’, as Iris Murdoch phrases it (p.5).

Her account of Plato’s position is sympathetic; she insists on a religious drive behind his philosophy. As a puritan, he is concerned both in Republic and Laws with the damaging effect of uncontrolled art upon what is meant to be a stable society; here Iris Murdoch compares the control of the arts in Eastern Europe (p.9), one of the many instances where she testifies that Plato’s thought is alive and relevant. For example, she agrees with him on ‘the cheapening and brutalising effect of an atmosphere where everything can be ridiculed’ (p.14).

Plato sets art against truth. One means of reconciliation might be to accept beauty as an intermediary, and Iris Murdoch examines Plato’s approach to this in the Philebus (p.9ff.), where the case for art other than simple forms is defeated by the need for pleasure to be pure; ‘Plato would not have objected to unpretentious wallpaper’ (a quotation to be cherished). The historical parallel from Islamic art does not appear till later, in her discussion of the Timaeus (p.57).

The Republic itself moves from the social and political attack on art in Books 2 and 3 to the metaphysical challenge in 10, and in the same way Iris Murdoch deepens her argument. The criticisms of writing in the Phaedrus and elsewhere (p.21ff.), and the description of the sophist as an image-maker (Sophist 260d), are the philosopher’s battles against anything which tends to lead away from truth. Truth, of course, for Plato in the period of the Republic, resides in the Forms (against which art is set in Republic 10), and to Plato beauty is valuable because it inspires the soul to an Eros of what is transcendent (Phaedrus and Symposium [p.33ff.]).

Here Iris Murdoch sees a parallel between Plato and Freud: ‘Freud certainly follows an important line in Plato’s thought when he envisages sex as a sort of universal spiritual energy, an ambiguous force which may be
destructive or can be used for good.’ For Freud, this energy can be mis-directed into fantasy by a work of art (p.40ff.); Plato sees art leading the soul from reality by making the rational element relax its guard (Republic 606a). Because art is unlimited it ‘has no discipline which ensures veracity’ (p.41).

The Sophist, with its examination of the logical inter-relation of Forms, marks for Iris Murdoch a new development in Plato’s view of reality, which is hard, and has ‘deep rigid structure’. This is anticipated by the importance of mathematics in the Republic, and recurs in the notion of cosmic reason in Timaeus 47a. Beauty is to be seen in pattern and necessity, not in ‘the complicit pliable disingenuous forms of art’ (Plato would relish that turn of phrase).

The changed picture of the Forms necessitates a rethinking of their relationship to visible particulars. This has already begun in the Sophist, where the Forms are no longer the sole reality; Plato adds motion and life and soul and intelligence (248e; p.48). Iris Murdoch offers and celebrates the Timaeus as the culmination of Plato’s views on art. ‘There is only one true artist, God, and only one true work of art, the Cosmos’ (p.49). A human artist does not create; his function is ‘in simple ways to discern and emphasize and extend the harmonious rhythms of divine creation’ (p.57).

The tone of the book (which is based on the author’s 1976 Romanes Lecture) has become deeper and more intense. Plato’s objections to art are fundamentally religious (p.65); it is ‘a defeat of the discursive intelligence’ and ‘confuses the spiritual pilgrimage’. Inspiring though this may be for the Platonist, it is small comfort for the lover of Aeschylus (to whose merits, the author admits, Plato is ‘scandalously indifferent’). Iris Murdoch, like most of us, is a lover of both, and redresses the balance with a defence of art on Plato’s grounds (its capacity to reveal truth) and in his own terms.

The reader may complain about details. If the Laws contain the earliest declaration of the equality of the sexes, what about the Republic (p.64)? Is every good play and novel about ‘the pilgrimage from appearance to reality? (p.80)? There are more misprints than one should expect, including one for the connoisseur — ‘the Forms become part of an argument for the immorality of the soul’ (p.3). Or we may be completely out of sympathy with Iris Murdoch’s imaginative entry into Plato’s religious fervour for philosophy. But the book is full of delights: the easy grace with which the author moves among Plato’s works; the sudden relevance of Auden, Jane Austen, Dante, Freud, Kant, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy and many others; phrases which make the pedestrian Platonist jealous (Plato’s work is ‘pervaded by a light of humour and sweet-tempered amusement’ [p.73]). The argument must be taken seriously both as a contribution to aesthetics
and as a warning that Plato’s rejection of art in the Republic is not to be taken shallowly, or confined within the limits of that work; this is a book to be read.

Elizabeth Duke


In this account of Plato’s moral doctrines down to the Republic, Irwin aims not to reconstruct the totality of these doctrines, but to set aside the more colourful metaphysical, political and religious views and to examine selected moral views in an isolation as antiseptic as possible (so it seems), with the purpose of discovering the general principles behind them and considering whether they constitute a philosophically defensible ethical position. His hope is that ‘someone who reads the dialogues and is persuaded by my account of them will see what issues Plato raises, and what kind of arguments are needed to decide for or against him’ (p.4).

After an introductory survey we are offered a modified version of the standard account of the ethical background from Homer to the Sophists. Chapter 3 is devoted to Socrates’ method and moral theory. Socrates regards virtue as a craft the product of which is a determinate, non-moral end, happiness, and virtue’s only value is that it is instrumental in achieving this end. The sufficiency of virtue for this purpose is secured by desire, which always has one’s own good as its ultimate object. Socrates’ hitherto vague talk of the final good is said in the next chapter to be replaced by the hedonism of the Protagoras, which is to be taken as Socrates’ own view, pleasure providing an appropriate product for the craft of living.

Chapters 5 and 6, dealing with the Gorgias and the middle dialogues, discuss Plato’s new interests. Noteworthy here is the way in which Irwin re-interprets: Recollection is wonderfully reduced to ‘someone reasons from his present beliefs to an answer which seemed beyond him’, with no antenatal source of present beliefs (p.139). The flux which Plato sees in sensible things is said to be change not in a thing’s self, but only in its aspect as compared with other things, and so no instability in the physical world is implied. The doctrine of separated Forms, although it is admitted Plato meant more by it, is reduced to the claim that forms of properties like justice are not referable to a set of sensible properties. If separation is kept to this minimal meaning, then ‘we will set aside some of Plato’s moral