That Iris Murdoch is one of the most important of contemporary English novelists is pretty well recognised by now. The present thesis attempts to define the basis of this importance, rather than to offer points of comparison between her and the other contemporary writers. Iris Murdoch, because of her moral and metaphysical preoccupations, may be differentiated from these other writers and placed in a class by herself. If one thinks of fellow contemporary writers — David Lodge, Margaret Drabble or Muriel Spark, to name just a few — the difference between them and Iris Murdoch stands out in startling relief. Their primary concern is with social, psychological and gender-specific problems; problems which receive only secondary emphasis in the Murdoch canon, the overriding thrust being on moral issues of good and evil. Under the apparently realistic surface of her works run strong currents of philosophical and metaphysical ideas that ultimately lead to transcendental issues of good and evil. Such a preoccupation with the moral life and concern for the human soul caught in the welter of contemporary life is
peculiarly Murdochian. Few English novelists have addressed this particular question; the English novel has traditionally flowed between realistic banks. The Russian novelists, Dostoevsky in particular, provide a basis of comparison, but not the English. For this reason I make no attempt to relate Murdoch to the English tradition, or to place her therein. Morality has, admittedly, been a central concern of such a writer as George Eliot, but even she generally keeps the 'religious' or transcendental dimension out of bounds. A metaphysical understanding of the existential problem forms the basis of Murdoch's moral concerns. And her understanding of these moral concerns is based on the transcendental notion of the good.

The central preoccupation in Iris Murdoch's work is morality. The considerable volume of her output including, besides her twenty-four novels, a play and books on philosophy, suggests tremendous energy and commitment. Indeed, there is a remarkable consistency in Iris Murdoch's moral ideas. Once these have been understood, it can be seen how with skilful expertise she weaves them into newer patterns of human emotion and endeavour in each novel to provide fresh insights into the essentially moral nature of things.
It has been stressed by most critics writing on Murdoch that her preoccupation with morality is free of any didacticism. The point has to be made yet once more in the present study. It is noteworthy that though the whole thrust of her art and philosophy falls on the importance of goodness, the necessity of trying to be good and the almost insurmountable difficulties involved in the attempt, her fiction is free of any proselytising zeal. No ranting missionary born anew to the task this writer, but a humane and intelligent person turning the attention of her thoughts and preoccupation on life. Indeed Iris Murdoch's intelligence is an integral part of her moral passion. As she says, morality is the ability to see clearly and in proper perspective. She herself sees clearly and intelligently and with great humour (for, is not a sense of humour a sense of proportion?), and this, her perception of life, is presented in the novels in a series of moral quandaries.

A brief summary of Iris Murdoch's understanding of moral philosophy may be in order here. She has termed her philosophy 'moral psychology':

The novel itself, of course, the whole world of the novel, is the expression of a world outlook. And one can't avoid doing this. Any novelist produces a moral world and there
is a kind of world outlook which can be deduced from each of the novels. And of course I have my own philosophy in a very general sense, a kind of moral psychology one might call it rather than philosophy.

A serious reader can gather from a reading of some of her novels the main moral threads of her 'moral psychology'. A reading of her books of philosophy, however, converts these strands into a deeply thought-out system of moral philosophy. What are these main moral ideas which occur consistently in all her books?

The first of course is the importance she pays to goodness, the idea of the Good. The title of her book on moral philosophy is *The Sovereignty of Good*. In a world devoid of the concept of God, the apprehension of the 'other' and the transcendent can be had only through the idea of Goodness, and it is this which gives the human soul a link with spirituality:

A genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good. This is a mystery with several aspects. The indefinability of Good is connected with the unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue.
The idea of the Good as an instrument of salvation for the human soul sounds simple enough. But the human soul being what it is, the attempt to be good seems to be a nearly impossible task. It will be seen later in this study that though most characters are given some hold on good by the author, the attempt they make to be truly selfless and good is fraught with disastrous obstacles. Though on the one hand the idea of goodness is beautifully right and simple, it is seen to be a moral task to aspire toward the good, a task for which only her few, very few, characters of good are fit. What then is her understanding of the human soul? It is here that Freud's influence on Murdoch's moral philosophy makes itself felt. Accurately interpreting modern psychology (especially Freudian psychology) as a modern doctrine of original sin, she says that it has provided a realistic and detailed picture of fallen man:

... Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand and control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and
unselfishness are not natural to human beings.

Not only Freud, but Plato also has influenced Iris Murdoch's understanding of the human psyche. Plato, who stresses the Eros and the erotic energy which is the driving force behind all human action, has an important place in her moral philosophy. How can the mechanical force of the human ego be contained and refined? The anti-consolatory moralist that she is, Murdoch refuses all consolation and easy solutions. She refuses to accept the claims made on human will or courage to refine the ego in the pursuit of goodness. Her emphasis falls on attention, on trying to 'see' as clearly as possible and on the reorientation of one's attention:

... It is also a psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps the idea of goodness itself. Human beings are naturally 'attached' and when an attachment seems painful or bad it is most readily displaced by another attachment, which an attempt at attention can encourage.
Proper attention to things is one way of circumventing and refining the selfish energies of the ego. The other virtue which is closely associated with the ability to pay attention is humility. These two virtues take the human mind off the ever-pressing demands of the self-centered psyche and, by the act of concentrating on the other, the external reality, enable the shedding of illusions and the entering into contact with truth. The good figures in Murdoch's novels are characterised by the attention they pay to others. Jenkin Riderhood in *The Book and the Brotherhood* is seen to be always available and ready to help. His self-effacement is a mark of humility. It is seen in the simplicity of his life and words. In fact the best lines in the Murdoch novels always go to those self-willed, purposeful and apparently strong characters who figure prominently in her books. The humble and good characters always hover in the background, showing perhaps the rarity of goodness in the world.

II

The foregoing summary of Iris Murdoch's 'moral psychology' establishes the moral grounding of her work. It is not surprising therefore, that most of the major critical works that have come out in the last decade on her novels, should have a strong slant on her moral
achievements. Of these Peter J. Conradi's book which came out in 1986 is titled Iris Murdoch: The Saint and Artist. The book is extremely well-written and has a number of accurate insights into Iris Murdoch's achievements as a novelist. The title lays a moral emphasis on the difference between the saint and the artist, the moral pursuit as against the pursuit of image (always a word associated with magic and illusion in Murdoch), and metaphor, a recurrent theme in the novels of Murdoch.

Elizabeth Dipple's Work For the Spirit (published earlier, in 1982) on the other hand, has a strong thesis and is inestimable in its usefulness as a critical reference book on Iris Murdoch's philosophic thought and her achievements as a novelist. It has to be mentioned, though, that Murdoch emerges rather unnaturally as a grim moralist in the book, which is very unlike what she really seems to be — an entertaining novelist with a very serious moral base.

Work For the Spirit, as the title suggests, sets out to establish how Iris Murdoch's novels demand careful reading and that the novelist's moral vision, as seen in her work, is indeed work for the human spirit. Dipple shows:

The fact that ultimate reality, even the cosmos itself, lies behind the drifting and
often frenetic bourgeois surface is the vast secret of Murdoch's best fiction.

This is also the large scope of Dipple's book. Though the slant is on the moral aspect in Murdoch, *Work for the Spirit*, with its complex structure and its fund of critical scholarship, is a book that cannot be missed by any student of Murdoch's novels.

The most recent critical work to have come out on Iris Murdoch's novels is Suguna Ramanathan's *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good*. This book also concentrates on the moral aspect in Murdoch. More particularly, it concentrates on the aspect of the Good and how the novelist's apprehension of the Good is embodied in her figures of good as they occur in her novels. *Figures of Good* is much narrower in scope than Dipple's book, concerning itself as it does with the good figures in the last seven novels of Iris Murdoch. But this work is excellently organised and has some brilliantly argued insights into Murdoch's understanding of the nature of goodness. The thesis of the book is the evolving idea of the nature of goodness in Murdoch; more particularly, how 'the governing idea of good is increasingly pared' (in each successive novel) 'till it reaches a stage of unselfconsciousness and simplicity that would be hard to surpass.' The thesis of this work may be seen from one
point of view as necessarily limiting the range of ideas that Murdoch discusses in the course of her œuvre. But on the other hand, the thesis indicates by contrast (which is taken note of in the text) the flux and muddle of life on the edge of which the good figure stands.

The present study also concentrates on the moral aspect in Iris Murdoch's novels. The focus, as the title indicates, is on the quagmire of illusions, falsities and untruths in which the human psyche so inevitably gets bogged down.

This is unlike the above-mentioned works on Murdoch where the concentration is on the conflict between the saint and the artist (as in case of Conradi), or the large moral canvas of the fiction of Murdoch (as in Dipple) or, finally, on the good figure (as in Suguna Ramanathan). The present study concentrates on the problem, rather than the solution. And since the moral problem occupies much of the action in the novels of Murdoch, the emphasis is broader, while at the same time being quite specific. The moral problem is not just a matter of 'A' and not 'B' confronting any single character, but is sensed to be a web, a mass of interconnected illusions, and falsities perpetuating feelings and thoughts and actions of almost all characters. And hence the impression of a quagmire: not only internal, in the minds or souls of characters,
but also external in their actions and deeds, connecting them with the world; the quagmire of untruth and falsity which is the condition of life and from which most may not escape. The moral quagmire may be ultimately judged to be a problem of proper discernment. What should be a clear path leads instead into a welter where each step taken sinks the character deeper into illusion. The huge number of Murdoch's novels (of which this study examines fourteen) with the intricate web of relationships in each novel, lends the impression of a world characterised by accident, moral vulnerability, an interconnected series of pitfalls and mire.

It has been seen, in the first part of this chapter, that Murdoch comprehends the human psyche as a 'mechanical entity' which keeps itself going with consolations and illusions of the day-dreaming variety. This, as the Hindu advaita philosophy and Buddhism have said, is the ego, a tissue of illusion. The annihilation of the fat human ego is the moral task involved in the pursuit of Goodness. But this is seen to be a hard, almost impossible task, for Iris Murdoch does not set much store, as will be discussed in the chapter on selflessness, by the human capacity for moral improvement, though she sees it as the most crucial task.
The nature of morality in Iris Murdoch's novels has a two-fold aspect. The first is the moral fibre of her novels. The host of characters who form a complex interconnected web of emotional relations and relations of thoughts and nebulous feelings, and the situations which such relationships endanger, are all seen to be permeated with a moral depth of meaning. Life itself, as perceived by the novelist, is moral, and every feeling, thought and action of every character has to do with morality. The moral realist that she is, Murdoch understands that the common human mind, though not without some aspect of good, is still very susceptible to falsities and illusions, leading it away from reality, truth and the Good. Hence, not surprisingly, it gets sucked down in its own quagmire of illusion and vanity.

The second aspect of morality in Iris Murdoch's novels is her recognition of moral problems. Over and above the moral fibre of her novels is the recognition and intelligent exploration of the problem under consideration. After a reading of the entire oeuvre, one may broadly categorise such moral problems into three classes. The first of these is naturally the problem of erotic love. No reader of her novels will fail to be struck by Murdoch's handling of erotic love in novel after novel, in innumerable love relationships. The second can be classified as the problem of religious
aspiration which is fraught with so many lurking dangers. The third moral problem, which is often obscured, is that of power. Though they are divided here to facilitate study, it may be observed that these moral problems sometimes overlap. For example, the problem of power may exist in an erotic relationship, for love can be and is used as an instrument of dominance. An aspiration towards God may be erotic love in disguise and so on. These three problems occur as pitfalls in the moral life of her characters. Though Murdoch's concept of Goodness is simplicity itself, to steer clear of these problems and to wind a precarious path, skirting the moral bogs of erotic love, power and religious aspiration is a task which only the few figures of good can manage. The moral quagmire to the dangers of which most Murdochian characters succumb is thus seen to be a condition of life. The figures of good conduct their quiet, invisible workings on the edge of the quagmire (that makes up the main setting for any novel of Murdoch) where frenzied activity is going on. This frantic struggle is the moral quagmire of the novel and hence its importance not only to the main action unfolding in the novel but also to the overall moral significance of the work. This is the thesis of the present study.

The three moral problems that Murdoch recognises and explores in her novels, the problems of erotic love,
religious aspiration and power, constitute separate chapters in this study. Every chapter has tried to examine one moral problem and see how Iris Murdoch in her work throws light on it from a hundred pin-pointed directions till a whole pattern of fresh insights and meanings is achieved.

No other writer has written as much about erotic love as Iris Murdoch. Yet in each fresh novel she has succeeded in seeing the problem from yet another angle, and has made available to the reader newer significances and depths. The chapter on erotic love will take into consideration the novels *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, *The Black Prince*, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, *The Good Apprentice*, *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *The Message to the Planet*. These novels have, for either the main theme, or the sub-plot, as in the case of the last two novels mentioned, the problem of erotic love, tackled with fresh insights, and hence these works are included in the chapter.

The most basic question that Murdoch asks about erotic love is whether it is love at all or merely self-love and vanity in disguise. In *The Sovereignty of Good* she says, 'Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors...'. If erotic love is compounded mainly of vanity, it follows that it is illusion-ridden and is hence the 'source of our
greatest errors'. In a novel like *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* she explores the conflict between erotic love and marital love. What place does erotic love have in the institution of marriage? Erotic love in Murdoch's work is seen to be a rejuvenating force, capable of reorienting the attention, but because it is so sudden and so beautiful, yet transitory and illusory, what is lovely and life-giving can change in a second to something which gives rise to black gloom and despair. Since it is not based, in most cases, on what is true and real, it is subject to 'infinite degradation'. Characters who get caught in the coils of erotic love, only get more deeply enmeshed in the quagmire of illusion and falsity.

Religious aspiration forms yet another moral problem in Iris Murdoch's moral psychology. It may be asked how an aspiration towards the holy and transcendent can be corrupt. The answer must be that since this aspiration too stems from the same, dark force of erotic energy, it follow that unless it is refined and purified of attachments, selfishness and illusions to which the psyche is so prone, it degenerates into mere self-indulgence and emotionalising. The problem is largely one of images. Effort is required to divest the emotionally charged image and see beyond it. As Murdoch has herself said, 'Images should not be resting-places but pointers.
towards higher truth'. The need to purify the eros is seen as a major requisite of the religious person. This problem is largely dealt with in Henry and Cato, and much more generally and with less focus in an earlier novel The Bell. In this process of purification, demythologising the concepts of a personal God and theistic faith is also seen as necessary. This is seen in Nuns and Soldiers. Religion has one more pitfall awaiting the unwary and that is the fatal attraction of magic - the element of power in religion. Thus here, the moral problems of power and religious aspiration are seen to overlap. The chapter on religion will examine Henry and Cato, Nuns and Soldiers, The Sea, the Sea, The Philosopher's Pupil and The Book and the Brotherhood. The last three novels will examine the problem of magic in religious aspiration.

Power is a theme on which little has been written and yet this is the theme which needs most scrutiny. In every relationship between human beings, in every situation, the underlying problem is the problem of maintaining the balance of a one-to-one standing. This is often, almost always, tilted, leading to feverish feelings of either hatred and resentment, or, exultant power. Power is seen by Murdoch as the most insidious and the most corrupt of all moral problems since it refuses to see the other as a separate entity. It exploits and makes use of other people's emotions and
thoughts and feelings and hence, is the direct antithesis to Goodness. Iris Murdoch very sensitively explores this problem, seeing different types of power relationships in different novels, perceiving that power always leads to grandiose and exaggerated feelings of the importance of the self. The novels included in this chapter are *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, *A Word Child*, *The Sea, the Sea*, *The Philosopher's Pupil*, *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *The Message to the Planet*.

Chapters two, three and four of this work examine these problems of erotic love, religious aspiration and power, respectively. Chapter five attempts to examine the concept of selflessness as presented in her novels by Iris Murdoch. This is because the path of selflessness leading out of the quagmire is part of the scene, and must for that reason be examined. It has already been seen that she places the utmost importance on goodness. Goodness is equivalent to selflessness in her moral philosophy; it implies a concern with other people's needs at the cost of one's own. Chapter five attempts to study two figures of good: Stuart Cuno in *The Good Apprentice* and Jenkin Riderhood in *The Book and the Brotherhood* as examples of invisible, unconscious, extremely simple goodness. The chapter also tries to see how Stuart, in the earlier novel, evolves into Jenkin, the good figure of the succeeding novel, *The Book and the Brotherhood*. The second part of this
chapter attempts to raise a few issues pertinent to the
discussion of selflessness in a world characterised by
the moral quagmire. How selflessness affects lesser
mortals, and the hope of moral improvement for fallen
man, are some questions raised.

It may be clarified at this juncture that this
study begins with The Nice and the Good, the eleventh of
Iris Murdoch’s twenty four novels, and ends with her
latest, The Message to the Planet. The fixing of the
starting point at The Nice and the Good is not an
arbitrary choice. Though a moral preoccupation is
evident in Iris Murdoch’s works right from the
beginning, it can be seen that a gathering seriousness
of moral brooding is noticeable in each succeeding work.
Most critics agree that with The Nice and the Good there
is a more emphatic focussing on moral problems in the
light of a growing understanding of Goodness. If the
novels of the earlier phase are an exploration of the
world and the moral struggle inherent in life, the
novels of the later phase see the inherent moral
struggle as a condition of life, and offer an
alternative in the transcendent Reality of the Good. It
is this moral realism together with the pqsiting of the
sovereignty of Good that gives these novels under study
a greater moral significance, and richer depth of
meaning. Fourteen novels, beginning with The Nice and
the Good and culminating with The Message to the Planet, thus form the subject of this thesis.