

THE PHILOSOPHY OF IRISH MURDOCH'S 'UNSELFING': AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) was an Irish philosopher and writer. She wrote on good and evil and the nature of sexuality and relationships. She was deeply interested in the intersection between philosophy and literature. She was made a Dame, and was ranked by The Times as twelfth on a list of the fifty greatest British writers since 1945. Her work has proved influential in many fields, including feminism and aesthetics. The idea of 'Unselfing' is a novel contribution to the world literature. Her novels have been masterpieces of literature. Clearing our mind of selfish care is something that's key to living well. It helps us have humility, be kinder to others, and puts things into perspective. The present paper discusses and explores the idea of 'Unselfing' given by Murdoch to the world of literary studies.

Keywords: Unselfing, love, disinterestedness, appreciation, immediate periphery. etc.

Murdoch, bequeathed a moral theory that was rooted in the idea of being attentive: holding "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality". This "just vision" required what she called "unselfing", a hugely challenging task but arguably exactly what's needed today to counter the rise of nationalism and tribal politics. It's something relatively few people of heard about "unselfing". It sounds a little like a new-age term crossed with a yoga technique. But it's not; it's a term in philosophy. Different philosophers have different views on this, but I think her most important contribution is the idea of "Unselfing"

Unselfing is a process first introduced by Iris Murdoch. One where a viewer of art, whether that's a painting, a play, a sculpture, or a book, is transpired "outside of themselves"

through the events that take place in front of them. a kind of feeling where you're really immersed in whatever you're doing and you become unaware of time passing you by. It has a restorative and energizing effect. Where Murdoch's theory differs, though, is the educational aspect of unselfing.

Disinterestedness is key for Murdoch's theory of unselfing ; one has to be capable of immersing oneself in the art form before unselfing can occur. If someone is too concerned with the economics of the play they're watching, or even what they're having for dinner, then they are not going to be able to set the grounds for unselfing to occur. This is something that happens often in nature; in this connection, Murdoch writes:

Beauty is the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and change of consciousness. I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care.

I say it is straightforward but of course this idea is very difficult both practically and philosophically. Our view of the world is always clouded by our own desires and concerns Murdoch often speaks of the "fat relentless ego". However, that experience of nature has a special role to play in making manifest to us the quality of consciousness that unselfing involves.

She gives a wonderful example of looking out the window while in an anxious state of mind – "brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige" when she spots a hovering kestrel. At once everything changes, a bit like a Gestalt shift. The hurt vanity disappears – one is unselfed and the full presence of the kestrel is revealed. A famous passage from her novel *The Bell* states:

Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.' Is this a fair summary of her thinking about truth? (Murdoch, 215)

In a real sense, it is a way of bringing oneself into contact with reality. This requires patient attention to what is there, which again demands unselfing. You can see how she might think that the artist displays such attention - she thinks realism in art is a moral achievement. But Murdoch doesn't think that truth is a matter of a statement lining up, or corresponding, with the facts. Rather, ways of being that are true as, for instance, when you love someone have reality as their object.

Disinterestedness and appreciation for its own sake are key characteristics of Murdoch's notion of unselfing; nowhere is this more evident than in her literature. Disinterestedness and appreciation for its own sake, are two distinct characteristics of the aesthetic attitude although they are interconnected. Appreciating something for its own sake, means that the desire to interact with the thing is not tainted by any other intentions. It means that you can't "swap out" one thing for another; if I really want to look at a painting by Cezanne, I can't look at one by

Caravaggio instead. If I really want to listen to Beethoven, listening to Mozart won't satisfy that desire.

Besides, for Murdoch, the knowledge that unselfing brings us is a different kind to the kind of knowledge we garner when we learn how to solve a maths problem, for example. Philosophers have identified different types of knowledge, and what constitutes knowledge. For some, knowledge is a 'justified true belief'. Others talk about self-knowledge; the kind of information we have about our own mental states. There's also scientific knowledge, and situated knowledge.

It's the knowledge Murdoch refers to in *The Bell*, the kind of knowledge of something outside of our immediate periphery. It's the knowledge of someone else's reality. Murdoch thinks that love can do this but that literature, too, can transport us outside of ourselves. A good novel should make me understand a little of what it's like to be someone else. This is central to the "unselfing" process. Understanding other people's lived realities enriches our own lives, and it also enhances our relationships with others. For when we look outside ourselves, we understand others.

Murdoch's idea of 'unselfing' is very straightforward. To unself; means to turn the attention outward, away from the self and on to the world. If one does this successfully, he/she will see things as they really are, and not through the lens of my own selfish concerns.

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