

Love and Unselfing in Iris Murdoch

JULIA DRIVER

Abstract

Iris Murdoch believes that unselfing is required for virtue, as it takes us out of our egoistic preoccupations, and connects us to the Good in the world. Love is a form of unselfing, illustrating how close attention to another, and the way they really are, again, takes us out of a narrow focus on the self. Though this view of love runs counter to a view that those in love often overlook flaws in their loved ones, or at least down-play them, I argue that it is compatible with Murdoch's view that love can overlook some flaws, ones that do not speak to the loved one's true self. Unselfing requires that we don't engage in selfish delusion, but a softer view of our loved ones is permitted.

1. Introduction

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.¹

This passage in *The Sovereignty of the Good* is one of the most famous in Iris Murdoch's oeuvre. In it, so much of her thought is conveyed. The kestrel is beautiful. The perception of that beauty takes her out of herself because the kestrel's beauty, its goodness, exists apart from her own interests. Taken out of herself, she has a clear perception of reality, of Beauty, of the Good. This is an example of a process or instance of 'unselfing'. Unselfing is a very important component to Murdoch's thought. It is through unselfing that we come to acquire knowledge of the Good, and make ourselves morally better people. It is through unselfing that we acquire virtue. Indeed, several commentators have noted that one of the distinctive features of Murdoch's philosophy, writing as she was in the mid 20th century, is her pursuit of an answer to the question 'How do we make ourselves morally better?' *We need to know the Good*, and this

¹ From Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, (Routledge Classics, 1970), 82.

will elude us if we remain psychologically isolated. In this essay I try to achieve a grasp of unselfing as Murdoch sees it and then discuss what I perceive to be potential shortcomings of the account. I also explore how unselfing as clear perception relates to love. I disagree with how many have read Murdoch on love, but arrive at an interpretation that I am happy to endorse: the tension between ‘seeing clearly’ and ‘love’ can be resolved by noting that love responds to the other person’s true self, which one can perceive without being aware of some of that person’s flaws.

2. Our Flawed Character

I have previously written about Murdoch’s distinctive brand of particularism, which happened to stimulate, and be a part of, dissatisfaction with the way the Moral Philosophy was conducted in mid-20th century Oxbridge. But, of course, her unhappiness was not limited to methodological issues. She, as well as Philippa Foot, had come through WWII believing that morality is real, it *must* be real. We are not simply booing Hitler when we condemn him. We are committed to the truth of the claim ‘Hitler was evil’. Further, it is important that Hitler be identified as ‘evil’; to simply say that what Hitler did was morally wrong, while true, leaves out too much detail. It leaves out the scope and depth of his wrongdoing. We are better able to understand the moral dimensions of the world around us when we use the thicker evaluative terms. This is another form of particularity. In the case of Murdoch, one can understand the world this way if one becomes imbedded in various details of one’s experience – and if one has the capacity to look at the world in what the early moral philosophers referred to as a ‘disinterested’ way – that is, where the goodness is perceived independently of the viewer’s own interests.

History contains ample evidence that human beings are flawed, and that those flaws get in the way of our virtue. Murdoch shared with Foot the view that virtues correct for defects of human nature, though their views on how this worked were quite different. Foot does so in her account by holding that virtues are correctives:

... they are *corrective*, each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good. As Aristotle put it, virtue is about what is difficult for men....one may say that it is only because fear and the desire for

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pleasure often operate as temptations that courage and temperance exist as virtues at all.²

In Foot, however, there is no appeal to an overarching Good the apprehension of which leads to virtue. She did not have the same systematic view of virtue held by Murdoch. Murdoch was a Platonist and on her view virtue was a way of seeing reality. As many other writers have noted her work is literally filled with allusions to Plato's Cave. Characters move out of the world of shadows and into the light. In *The Nice and the Good*, one character literally leaves a cave as a more enlightened person. One of the primary characters of the novel, John Ducane, has entered Gunnar's cave on a rescue mission, only to be trapped with the person he was trying to save:

He thought, if I ever get out of here I will be no man's judge. Nothing is worth doing except to kill the little rat, not to judge, not to be superior, not to exercise power, not to seek, seek, seek. To love, and to reconcile and to forgive, only this matters. All power is sin and all law is frailty. Love is the only justice.³

Indeed, Ducane is in a position to destroy someone's career, and then decides not to do it. The novel ends with many acts of reconciliation amongst the characters. It also illustrates another feature of unselfing: putting things in the right perspective. An important feature of the analogy or identification between beauty and the good is the significance of perspective in both. In spelling out his own account, and making use of the analogy, David Hume notes that one of the things we do is we correct for imperfect perspectives and this allows for consistency in our judgements of beauty.⁴ For Hume it was important for us to pick a fixed point of reference so that everyone, in effect, was talking about the same thing when they made judgements of beauty as well as moral virtue. For Murdoch, though, it wasn't a matter of being able to communicate effectively with others, it was a matter of getting it right, of our judgements matching the world. The value of a work of art, the value of the world, the value of beautiful things in the world – all of this has nothing to do with *my* interests. Or even, with anyone's interests. This is a rejection of the sorts of considerations that Hume found important in our

² Philippa Foot, 'Virtues and Vices' in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: OUP, 1978) 1–18.

³ Iris Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good* (Penguin Books, 1968).

⁴ David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

perceptions of beauty. Hume had the view that the pleasures we felt were often due to the utility we perceived in an object or character trait. And, certainly, Utilitarians had the view that considerations of utility were what provided moral justification. Murdoch was rejecting this view, which was how some of her colleagues viewed morality, as serving our interests. Ducane, in *Gunnar's Cave*, came near death. It is a literary trope that coming close to death can change a person's perspective, enlarge it. In Ducane's case, it gave him a better sense of what was truly important. It is not retribution, but love and understanding.

To see another person justly we may need to adopt the perspective, or become clearer on the 'context' that another person is living in. Moral psychologists refer to this as a kind of empathy in that it involves another meta-cognitive skill – that of taking the perspective of another person. This skill is important in our interactions with others, since if we cannot see another's perspective they will be a mystery to us. But there is another kind of empathy as well. We might care about others and want to see the world from their point of view as a matter of understanding them sympathetically.

This way of seeing reality, the virtuous way, simply as a matter of contingent fact does correct for flaws of human nature related to ego, but that isn't a defining feature of virtue. In a world without any temptation, there still could be virtue. It is just that, given the reality of our fallen nature, clear perception *would* dispel the self-interested fantasies we conjured up to preserve our own egotism. In 'On God and the Good' Murdoch, though not a Freudian herself, finds a Freudian view of human nature 'realistic':

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 or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason.⁵

Unselfing, then will involve close attention, and in understanding others we need to pay close attention in such a way as to 'share' their contexts. This is difficult to do. She explicitly notes that often we cannot do this. Yet, there is much that indicates that unselfing is not accomplished via force of will. That doesn't support the phenomenology she appeals to in many cases. Instead, it is a kind of

⁵ Op. cit. note 1, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, 50.

letting go of our egocentrism in the presence of beauty. This is why she uses the example of seeing the kestrel. She is sitting at a window, brooding over a slight to her dignity, and making no attempt to escape those thoughts. But she was *open to* the escape the kestrel supplied. In that case, there is no force of the will at work. On the other hand, this can run counter to other things that she says about unselfing, for example, that it requires moral imagination and effort. This describes the famous M case, since in that case the mother-in-law is presented as someone who is *trying* to attend to her daughter-in-law charitably. The case is set up in the context of M's relationship with her daughter-in-law, D. M begins with a very low opinion of D. Though she thinks that D is basically 'good hearted' she also thinks that D lacks 'dignity' and 'refinement' and 'tiresomely juvenile.' However, M is also reflective, and begins to reconsider.

M tells herself 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters.⁶

M is quite clearly *trying* to look at D more clearly. M is *trying* to correct for her excessive conventionality. But there need not be any contradiction. We can hold that she is really open to both ways of attending: being open to the world, and trying to see it more clearly. Her use of 'attention' can be understood to include both. She notes in *The Sovereignty of the Good* that attention is '...a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the moral agent'. However, there are pitfalls to the 'trying' element, which will be discussed later in the paper.

Though it may be hard to properly attend, we can do it sometimes. When we come to genuinely appreciate a person, for example, and, in other cases, to *love* someone, we can do this. Love enables us to thwart our tendencies towards self-involvement, selfishness, fantasy, and illusion:

It is in the capacity to love, that is to see, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is the proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images, is itself a powerful

⁶ Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of the Good* (Routledge, 1970) 17.

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system of energy, and most of what is often called ‘will’ or ‘willing’ belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love.⁷

In her novel, *The Sea, The Sea*, the main character, Charles Arrowby, is someone who is enormously self-centered and self-deceived.⁸ Arrowby tells himself that he has ‘abjured’ the magic of the stage, and London, in order to rusticate in a cottage, Shruff End, so as to devote himself to becoming good. However, the novel details just how extraordinarily bad Arrowby is at becoming good. He is a master of self-deceit. He deceives himself about the love of a woman, Hartley Finch, who he has not seen in decades. He concocts elaborate and ill-advised plans to bring them together. He believes himself in love, though he utterly fails to clearly see the object of his love.

Charles Arrowby is certainly an exaggerated character, but he exhibits an uncomfortable truth: that we are prone to telling ourselves comfortable stories in order to preserve our own good view of ourselves. Some of the early sentimentalist writers on morality, such as Shaftesbury and Hume, often noted that we, unlike animals, have the ability to engage in meta-cognitive reflection, and that this is what allowed us to be self-regulating. We have a need to be able to withstand *our own scrutiny*. If we saw moral ugliness in our own characters, we would be moved to change. Murdoch, however, was worried about our meta-cognitive capacities responding not to reality, but to comfortable stories we tell ourselves so that we *can* bear our own scrutiny. Fantasy insulates us against suffering and self-recrimination.

Unselfing, then, is a matter of seeing the world with clarity, inspiration in beauty, attending to others with loving appreciation in such a way as to overcome our egoistic tendencies. However, Christopher Mole has pointed out a possible problem with this view. It seems to leave out something that we do think is important for moral development: *some* attention to our own mental states. Consider one of his cases:

... a man is wondering whether he should tell his wife about a minor indiscretion in his past. He recognizes that keeping the secret is a way of being untrustworthy and so he resolves to tell the truth. What moves him is the realization that he does not want to be the kind of person who would continue to lie. The

⁷ Op. cit. note 5.

⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea* (Penguin Books, 1980).

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distinctive feature of this form of moral reasoning is that the terms of evaluation it employs indict the agent rather than the act.⁹

Indeed, as Mole points out, Murdoch herself points out instances of self-criticism. In the case of M, discussed earlier, she describes M, the mother-in-law as ‘intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism’. Mole notes that of all of her characters, John Ducane exemplifies the character caught up in self-reflection and self-criticism, and the pitfalls associated with them. From *The Nice and the Good*:

What Ducane was experiencing, in this form peculiar to him of imagining himself as a judge, was, though this was not entirely clear in his mind, one of the great paradoxes of morality, namely that in order to become good it may be necessary to imagine oneself good, and yet such imagining may also be the very thing which renders improvement impossible, either because of surreptitious complacency or because of some deeper blasphemous infection which is set up when goodness is thought about in the wrong way. To become good it may be necessary to think about virtue, although unreflective simple people may achieve a thoughtless excellence. Ducane was in any case highly reflective and had from childhood quite explicitly set before himself the aim of becoming a good man.

Earlier I tried to establish that attention can be both an openness to reality, as well as more active. It can also involve a *trying* to see. In the above passage, though, we see Murdoch alluding to the pitfalls of self-study, of trying to see oneself. Recall also, in the earlier quote from *The Sovereignty of the Good* regarding Freud’s ‘realistic’ view of human nature, she alludes to his very pessimistic views on introspection. Trying to attend to the self may necessitate thinking of oneself as unattentive first, since this needs to be established first if one is to be motivated to improve – and this opens the door to distorting psychological influences again. Mole tries to dissolve this tension by holding that for Murdoch, when we are attempting to become good, we cannot achieve that through *pure* introspection. We need contact with the world, with external reality:

⁹ Christopher Mole ‘Attention, Self, and *The Sovereignty of the Good*,’ in *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, ed. Anne Rowe (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 75.

Even when introspection succeeds in being honest and astute, the features of ourselves that we learn about through introspection are features that are morally salient only on account of their relationships to things outside the self. Introspective meditations do not bring us into a proper relationship with the world, and they do not tell us whether we are in a proper relationship with the world. It is careful understanding of the world that reveals our failures of virtue as failures. If one takes our moral character to be partially constituted by the ways in which we attentively interact with the world, then one can hold that character traits are primary bearers of intrinsic value without thereby making one's own properties a focus of concern in one's pursuit of goodness.¹⁰

Mole seems to be interpreting Murdoch as holding that it is pure introspection that is inimical to self-improvement. However, critical reflection on ourselves does involve considering our relation to the world – to what is genuinely Good. It is this contact with reality that allows us to see our failures, the mismatch between ourselves and the world. It is the world that provides the standard of Good.

Another possibility that Mole does not consider is that Murdoch is alluding to another well known paradox: the paradox of hedonism. Suppose it is true that our proper aim is to achieve happiness, or pleasure of the right sort. Given various plausible assumptions about how we and the world work it would seem like this theory gives us self-defeating advice, because if one actively seeks happiness one will stand less of a chance of actually achieving it. The best way to be happy is not to adopt a strategy of constantly looking for it. Instead, one should be *open to it* as one lives one's life normally. All of the things we associate with happiness, including loving relationships, are not to be sought out as a means to that happiness. When I love another person, I love that person for themselves. That's where the story ends. I do not love someone *because I want to be happy*, though if I do love someone that will be a part of my happiness. So perhaps the resolution of Murdoch's paradox is that when we try to be good without an *appreciation of the good*, which we can achieve by being open to its presence in our lives, we will fail. I ought not seek out my own virtue, but pay attention to what is around me, be open to it, and thereby achieve virtue. As Mary Midgley writes in *Beast and Man*, the pleasure one gets at seeing beauty, in the kestrel, is 'self-forgetful' – what ties being open to

¹⁰ Op. cit. note 8, 83.

beauty and trying hard to see it is this self-forgetting.¹¹ By self-forgetting she doesn't mean that the virtuous person forgets the things that have happened to her in the past. Instead, she 'forgets' a false view of the importance of the self.

In any case, however this paradox is to be resolved, if it can be, it is relevant to other things that Murdoch claims for clearly seeing, for loving attention.¹² What about Love? Love does take us out of ourselves in the ways that Murdoch outlines. But part of what it is to be in love with someone and to care for them for their own sakes is to also take a careful look at oneself. When I love someone I need to take a long look at myself. Love might not justify a relationship all on its own. Am I someone who is really good for the person I love? Does my character warrant love in return?

Thus, there is a good case to be made for the fact that eliminating self-reflection also conflicts with the development of moral character. After all, how *disinterested* can I really be if I want to improve *myself*, as Ducane does? Even if I relax, and take the world as it is, just by following that advice I am still trying to improve *myself*. In fact, it seems likely that my main worry should be my own character, and not improvement of the character of others.

Further, there is a distinction between seeing clearly and overcoming our egoistic tendencies. Someone might press the point that love may at least sometimes involve a *failure* to see clearly, even if it always involves a thwarting of our egoistic instincts. Self-deception isn't always of Arrowby's sort. Self-deception is not always deceiving myself *about myself*, or in such a way as to flatter my self-image. A parent, for example, arguably has more reason to overlook at least minor flaws in their children than strangers do. And by 'overlook' I mean that the parent is not taking on board the entirety of what the evidence supports. Perhaps, for example, the evidence supports the judgement that Donald's child is not even a mediocre scholar. It may still behoove Donald, as a parent, to have a somewhat better assessment of the child. This may be very important for the child's development and improvement.

This is true for other close relationships as well. There's something to the saying that 'Love is blind'. Of course, it ought not be too blind, so as to overlook serious failings. But some flaws ought not register.

¹¹ Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man* (New American Library, 1978), 359.

¹² Samantha Vice criticizes Murdoch for the erasure of self in her 'The Ethics of Self-Concern,' in *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, ed. Anne Rowe (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60–71. Mole is trying for a reconciliation between two strands he sees in Murdoch's work.

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One phenomenon of love is that we often feel compelled to make sincere excuses for the person we love, so that others are aware of how we see them.

This issue is taken up by Susan Wolf in her study of *The Philadelphia Story*.¹³ There she argues that Murdoch did not seem to have a ‘positive light’ view of love, of the sort I have sketched in the previous paragraphs. Instead, love involves loving the other in spite of their flaws, in full awareness of their flaws. Thus, there is no incompatibility at all between seeing clearly and love. This is illustrated in the plot of *The Philadelphia Story*. The film is about love and misadventure. Tracy Lord is a socialite who is about to marry for the second time. She divorced her first husband, Dexter Haven, because of his flaws. She felt he drank too much, though his drinking was in response to her low opinion. Her fiancé is George Kittredge. Kittredge has idealized Tracy, made her perfect.. In the end, she breaks off with George. After seeing her drunk and being carried by another man, rather than his mind turning to charitable interpretations of the evidence, he presumes the worst. He has little confidence in her. Tracy, instead, marries Dexter again. Dexter knows what she is really like, and he has confidence in her loyalty. Dexter also is well aware of the flaws that she really does have. And, Dexter loves her in spite of her flaws. As Wolf notes: ‘...Dexter’s love is the truest and best love Tracy (or anyone) can have...’ precisely because Dexter loves Tracy ‘...*knowing her completely*. Specifically, he loves her, and indeed loves her unreservedly, knowing her flaws.’

But I don’t think that this is quite fair to the positive light view. George’s view of Tracy is not a slightly idealized view of Tracy, it isn’t Tracy at all. In the case of Dexter, he consciously takes on board Tracy’s flaws – her insistence on perfection in others, for example – and loves her anyway. This is because, I take it, that she is not *just* a perfectionist, *she* is much more. But if this is right, it means that there is room for overlooking flaws. One can love another aptly even when one does not see all of their flaws, as long as those flaws are not an element of the person’s true self – that is, those flaws do not speak to their *core* set of values and commitments. Thus, we can judge some love as bad in virtue of the overlooking of very serious flaws in a person’s character – being in love with a

¹³ Susan Wolf ‘Loving Attention: Lessons in Love from *The Philadelphia Story*,’ in *Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction*, ed. Susan Wolf and Christopher Grau (Oxford University Press, 2014), 369–386.

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mass murderer, for example. But when the person is fundamentally decent, love *can* overlook their flaws. This isn't to say that love *must* overlook defects of character. Indeed, Dexter's full appreciation of Tracy's character may render his love even better, more stable, less liable to disillusion.

On one interpretation of Murdoch, a moralized interpretation in which love is only apt in response to seeing the goodness beauty in others, love is what Kate Abramson and Adam Leite term 'reactive love'. For Abramson and Leite, it isn't the *only* kind of love, but is a very important kind of love:

There is a variety of love that is, in paradigm or central cases, an affectionate attachment to another person, (a) appropriately felt as a non-self-interested response to particular kinds of morally laudable features of character expressed by the loved one in interaction with the lover (and others the lover loves), and (b) paradigmatically manifested in certain kinds of acts of goodwill and characteristic affective, desiderative and other motivational responses (including other-regarding concern and a desire to be with the beloved).¹⁴

Abramson and Leite note that love is disinterested – again, in the sense that one loves the other *for their own sake*. They also have another component that corresponds to Murdoch's second feature of unselfing, the seeing clearly of the other person's good qualities. Abramson and Leite also highlight the reactive nature of the emotion. It is in response to the beloved's goodness of character. It is an apt response if one sees the other clearly, that is, if the other person really possesses the qualities in question, they are *real*. Why is this 'reactive'? Because it is a response to quality of the will, the quality of the other person's character. It is quite right that utter delusion is not compatible with love in the sense that it renders the love inapt. If the love is *based on* a false belief, rather than merely tolerating it, the love is not apt.

This allows a middle way between two extremes. Love is a matter of one person seeing another clearly enough to understand and appreciate the beloved's true self. This isn't knowing everything there is to know about the beloved and is compatible with overlooking flaws that do not impact the self. Through empathy with the person one loves, one understands what they do and don't endorse. One can speak authoritatively about who they really are. Of course, this

¹⁴ Kate Abramson and Adam Leite, 'Love as a Reactive Emotion,' *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (245), 677.

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process if not done correctly has its own pitfalls – we can deceive ourselves about others just as well as we can deceive ourselves about our own characters. But this is just part of the human condition that needs to be kept in line through maintaining our contact with reality.

The University of Texas at Austin
Julia.Driver@austin.utexas.edu