

Know Thyself to Un-Thyself

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With the looming climate crisis, it is easy to blame large corporations and other massive carbon emitters for our bleak future. However, we should also recognize that particular predominant ways of thinking have supported such unsustainable practices. I think that in Western societies in particular, many of us have lost our ability to take notice of our world. ‘Know thyself’, a well-known adage, is a phrase many people ignore because it involves acknowledging our limits and our particular situatedness in the world. In contrast to overly-abstracted ethical philosophies, Iris Murdoch prescribes what she calls ‘unselfing’: a state of consciousness in which we gain perspective of ourselves through an encounter with the beautiful ‘other’.¹ Our categorization of various others can give us the illusion of control over our environment, but, through experiences of unselfing, we learn that we do not tower over reality. The Western understanding of humanity has been shaped by the image of an ideal human who is self-contained, in control, and untouched by the world. We cope with our limitations and mortality by convincing ourselves that we somehow exist outside of our messy and unpredictable reality. However, the cultivation of virtues, particularly humility and attention, is a healthier way of coping—both for ourselves and for those around us. This point is particularly relevant in a world that seems to be driven by money and power despite the obvious signs that these practices are leading us to our demise. Since, as Murdoch assumes, humans are naturally selfish, unselfing is crucial for changing our perspective so that we can take better care of ourselves and of the earth..

Experiences of unselfing can happen in a variety of ways, but they generally involve an encounter with something beautiful that diminishes the observer’s self-centeredness. As an example, Murdoch describes herself observing a kestrel in a brooding state. When her eyes suddenly catch sight of the beautiful, hovering bird outside of her window, everything weighing on her mind disappears. In that second, she is brought out of her anxious self and she sees only the kestrel. When the

moment has passed, her perspective of her situation has changed and her selfish thoughts no longer seem to be important.² This kind of experience is not forced, nor is it a mere appreciation of beauty; rather, it is “a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence” of nature or art.³ In seeing the kestrel, Murdoch temporarily loses her sense of self, and all of the preoccupations that came with it, and is captivated by the purposelessness of beauty and existence in something outside of herself.

To further explain the kind of impacts that unselfing can have for us, Murdoch turns to Plato’s discussions of virtue and the Good. She says that ‘good’ is not just a sign that we use to qualify different things or actions; rather, it refers to “a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know.”⁴ Our understanding of the Good comes from seeing traces of it instantiated in the other and never in its entirety. The Good lives “on both sides of the barrier” of what is known and unknown and, as such, the mere idea of it reveals the limitations of our own knowledge.⁵

It may seem strange to suggest that we can know *of* the Good if we cannot properly know what it *is*—how could we have come up with this idea in the first place? Consider the following example: In learning a new language, you assume that utterances in the other tongue have a sense to its speakers, but you do not have any understanding of what it is like to live in that other language. The ways that idioms and characteristics of that language connect to and add to experience are beyond what you can understand of that language from the outside. Although you can imagine and understand how the language works, the internal experience of what it is like to ‘live in their terms’, so to speak, is not accessible to you. In this way, you can know *of* this other language without knowing what it *is* from the inside. Even if you begin to learn the other language and your assumptions about it are slowly refined or corrected as you became familiar with its particularities, you will only glimpse the vastness of the other language, and you will have a

better sense of how much you do not know. Similarly, the Good is something we are *aware* of but have not grasped. The closer we get to it, the more we recognize the limits of our own understanding.

As such, unselfing is characterized by humility and attention. It requires that we know the place of the self, its limits, and to act with an openness and deep respect toward the other. Murdoch uses the example of learning a new language, in her case, Russian, to describe how experiences of unselfing involve a surrender of the self and its rational abilities. Entering into the world of another language requires letting go of our own linguistic habits to defer to the other's authority. By opening ourselves to this foreign other, to see it in its own terms, we gain a better understanding of what it actually is. Murdoch says: "Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality."⁶ Her love of the Russian language draws her toward the language, the other, with a deep respect, and she observes it instead of assimilating it into her categories of understanding. Learning a language calls for humility and honesty; it requires that we see ourselves as limited beings and admit that there are things we do not know.

An important aspect of unselfing is the desire to see—and pay attention to—the world as it really is. This epistemic commitment has inescapable ethical implications, or, as Murdoch says, "the authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality."⁷ Since we must know the reality of a situation to make a proper moral judgment about it, truth and morality are interconnected. Knowledge will give us the freedom to be able to make a better choice, and indeed it compels us to act ethically in light of that knowledge. Love is another virtue that is connected with the virtue of attention. Murdoch says: "The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*."⁸ Moral judgments are not best determined by a rule, but rather through attention and humility. Each dilemma is situated and particular, requiring that we use our virtue to act well. The exercise of "really *looking*" involves resisting the urge to bring the observed back into the self by imposing a self-comforting narrative on it. So, Murdoch says that "it is a *task* to come to see the world as it is."⁹ It is an ongoing exercise in self-discipline to be continually aware of one's selfish tendencies and to practice humility and attention toward the world. It requires lived practice to create these habits of action, and it cannot be taught all at once.

Through continual acknowledgement of the reality of self and others, we may continue to understand our limits and all the ways in which the world is beyond our control. In the words of Jan Zwicky, "the more we attend to the world, the less we find ourselves wishing to control it."¹⁰ This is an important sentiment in light of the current climate crisis since the world is reminding us that our inattention to sustainability is destructive and that our efforts to control the environment are futile.

Even now, some groups remain unconvinced that their harmful practices need to be stopped for the sake of our survival, perhaps because they are unwilling to attend to nature and its spokespeople with humble and loving intent. To combat this ignorance, we can work to cultivate virtues, which will influence our habits and thereby our actions. When faced with an ethical decision, we act not simply out of strength of will, but also according to our habits or "the quality of our usual attachments."¹¹ To cultivate love and attention is to train oneself to act from habits of virtue instead of our selfish nature. Through practice, these virtues become more accessible when we make decisions, and it helps us to continuously look to see the other as they truly are.

The attention that is involved in unselfing is connected to a desire to get at truth for the sake of morality. The idea that the truth is useful for ethical considerations is not new, but in the past the search for truth has meant forgetting the self in an effort to maintain a neutral standpoint. For instance, Murdoch argues that Kant was trying to systematically attain truth by letting go of selfish emotions and giving primacy to reason. He also wanted to remove the self, but, according to Murdoch, he mistakenly *returned* to the self as the solution. In our individualized Western culture, Kant's idea has morphed into an idealized image of humanity. Murdoch says: "He [the ideal human] is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal."¹² Given that religion has become less relevant in our culture, God is no longer synonymous with the Good, and God does not keep us in line; thus *we* have taken God's place as the highest subject. For the sake of truth, we remove ourselves from the messy world to be unaffected by the objects we observe. We become like the scientist who sets up an experiment and controls all of the variables. Underlying this attitude is the Enlightenment dream to organize everything into neat categories, a project predicated on the assumption that all things can be known. However, this mode of thinking fails to recognize that an observer cannot be removed from their context and perspective, no matter how hard they try to detach themselves from this reality. That we are able to imagine a tidy, organized space of knowledge does not mean that we can live there. We are embedded in this messy world, and we are observed as much as we are observers. Willing our superiority or alienation does not make it so. Murdoch disagrees with Kant's return to the self because it fails to acknowledge the humble reality of humanity. We are as limited as we are rational.

Nature continues to remind us, with increasingly frequent and extreme weather events, that we can avoid neither the material limits of the world nor the contingency of our lives. Rather than trying to control our environment (an impossible task), unselfing experiences can teach us to let go of control over the things we ob-

serve, mirroring our own susceptibility to the chance of life. In a moment of unselfing, we are captivated and cannot look away, and once it has passed, we cannot forcibly re-create it. We may appreciate its beauty, but we cannot will it to last. The practice of attention and humility in unselfing is connected to understanding the mortality of all things, including ourselves. In Zwicky's words, "it is to look at the world openly and to see it, and one's own actions, and the actions of others, for what they are: gestures that vanish in the air like music."¹³ To see things as they are is to accept that they are ephemeral. It is difficult to be truly humble because it requires that we acknowledge the reality of our mortality, which is incompatible with our idolization of an abstracted or unaffected self. Part of knowing oneself is to know that one is not immune to the realities of life.

As the climate crisis continues to escalate and death is seemingly inevitable, Jan Zwicky suggests that we need to learn to face our mortality. Accepting death may seem like a grim message, but Zwicky argues that in the context of the virtues involved in unselfing, it can inspire hope. For instance, attention to the world and all of its intricacies can help us to see all of being as a miracle.¹⁴ Even the thought of being, in and of itself, as something without purpose, can incite moments of unselfing.¹⁵ To know life is to know that it is not merely defined by its end—death—but by all the moments in between, many of which are unexpectedly beautiful. To know oneself, then, is to understand the gift of being alive and that the beauty will someday end. To orient ourselves this

way and to fully appreciate each passing moment, is an important virtue in a world laden with fear and destruction. As I have argued, attention can also have a powerful influence on the way we act in the world. Zwicky quotes Simone Weil: "To know that that man, who is hungry and thirsty, truly exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself."¹⁶ Practicing attention toward the other allows us to see what is good in their being, and this compels us to act accordingly in deep respect for them. The love we develop in humble attention is not a lust for control or ownership. What could be more moral than action that rises out of a genuine love for the other?¹⁷

I end on a similar note as Murdoch: "Although he [the humble man] is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good."¹⁸ Ethical theories can influence the world in unethical ways, and Kant's theory stands as an example. I argue, however, that cultivating virtues like humility and loving attention can address the individualist selfishness that has contributed to climate change and offer peace in accepting one's own mortality. Humility may indeed be our best chance for virtuous living, especially as things stand in Western societies. To those who are willing to listen, nature is reminding us of our situatedness and our fragile, dependent reality. As such, Murdoch's message is quite relevant: unself to know your limits, see the world in humility and attention, and listen to the other as you do the difficult work of unselfing.

Notes

1. 'Other' refers to anything that is outside of one-self, including all of nature, other humans, etc.
2. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970; repr., New York: Routledge, 2014), 82.
3. Murdoch, 83.
4. Murdoch, 90.
5. Murdoch, 90.
6. Murdoch, 87.
7. Murdoch, 88.
8. Murdoch, 89; italics in original.
9. Murdoch, 89.
10. Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky, *Learning to Die* (Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2018), 65.
11. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.
12. Murdoch, 87.
13. Bringhurst and Zwicky, *Learning to Die*, 50.
14. "We attend also to the world's extraordinary surprise: its refusal to quit, the weed flowering in tar, the way beauty and brokenness so often go together"; Bringhurst and Zwicky, *Learning to Die*, 65.
15. Murdoch quotes Wittgenstein: "Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical"; *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83.
16. Bringhurst and Zwicky, *Learning to Die*, 53.
17. "Whoever does not know nature through love will never know her"; Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas*, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), fragment no. 103, 134.
18. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 101.