

Attending Against Self-Assertion

For Iris Murdoch (1999), ‘unselfing’ attention is an experience of reduced self-concern on a person’s perception resulting in a more open and truthful view of reality. On some readings of Murdoch, unselfing is understood as an effortful resistance to one’s ‘ego’ or an elimination of self entirely (Caprioglio Panizza 2022). On my view, however, unselfing is best understood as an open receptivity towards all of reality, such that there is no assertion of self onto perception. Framing the work of attention against a concept of ‘self-assertion’ allows for meaningful attention to self and others without the self-focus that results from taking ‘self’ or ‘ego’ as something to be improved or fought against.

The mode of self-assertion distorts perception by insisting on the existence of a particular self (i.e., a self with particular qualities, skills, power, etc.). These often subtle assumptions about ourselves come into view when we are confronted by external objects that do not affirm our image of self. The Good, God, or an external source of energy disrupts our fantasies and brings our perception more in line with reality. This structure requires we recognize our dependence on something external and disrupts the image of self as willpower separate from psyche.

Framing unselfing through my concept of self-assertion highlights three important aspects of Murdoch’s project: recovering a concept of God, reimagining a concept of self, and developing a more realistic image of moral life. Murdoch thought that the loss of a concept of God negatively changed our concept of self, and she critiqued moral theorists for their unrealistic pictures resulting from the image of will distinct from psyche. Murdoch worked to remedy these conceptual gaps by turning to Simone Weil’s ideas about moral life, finding a balance between personal choice and external influence. My view of unselfing through self-assertion follows this thread through Murdoch’s notes in her copy of “Human Personality” (Weil 1962), complimented by Weil’s concepts of *la personne* and the languages of rights and justice. *La personne* is like the mode of self-assertion, insistent on personal rights and a particular existence. The attentional and moral work is to shift away from this mode toward the language of justice, associated with the Good.

Both Murdoch and Weil point to our need for something external and outside of our control as a catalyst to unselfing attention and the resulting moral growth. My view, framed by a concept of self-assertion, recognizes our need for external objects to move us toward clarity and more just action.

References

Caprioglio Panizza, Silvia. 2022. *The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil*. New York: Routledge.

Murdoch, Iris. 1999. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Edited by Peter Conradi. New York: Penguin Books.

Weil, Simone. 1962. "Human Personality." In *Selected Essays 1934–1943*, chosen and translated by Richard Rees, 9–34. London: Oxford University Press. IML 925, from the Iris Murdoch Collections at Kingston University Archives. Plus, an additional page of Iris Murdoch's annotations.