

1828260

Student Cover Sheet and Reflection on Feedback Form

University of Birmingham – School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion

Taught Programmes Essay/Assignment

Cover Sheet 2019-20

To be included as the first page of all work submitted for assessment

Required Information:

Module Title:	Being Good and Doing Right	
Module Level:	LH	
Student ID (SRN)	1828260	
Essay/assignment title:	Explain and critically assess Murdoch's account of virtue.	
Confirmed Word Count:	1495	
Have you had an extension agreed?		No
If Yes, what is your extension deadline?		

REMINDERS

1. Do **NOT** give your name on the assignment or in your file name; instead put your SRN on the top right hand corner of each page and include this cover sheet.
2. Assignments should be submitted electronically via the module section on Canvas by 12 noon on the published deadline
3. A penalty of 5 marks will be imposed for each working day the assignment is late, until a grade of 0% is reached.
4. You **MUST** refer to the School's local documentation on word count penalties. This guidance can be found in the Programme Handbook for your programme.
5. By submitting this assignment you are declaring that it is not plagiarized, but rather all your own work, and that all quotations from, allusions to and paraphrasing of the work of others have been appropriately cited and referenced.
6. If you believe that your performance may have been affected by illness or similar matters, your submission declares that you have followed the guidance on extenuating circumstances and extensions. If you have submitted evidence relating to extenuating circumstances in connection with this piece of work, please mark the following box.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure you upload the correct version of your essay to the correct assignment section on Canvas. Assignments should be submitted as **Word or PDF documents** only.

STUDENT REFLECTION ON FEEDBACK AND ASSESSMENT

In the academic year 2019-20 we are asking you, as the starting point for your summative assessments, to complete this individual Student Reflection on Feedback sheet when you submit your work.

This coversheet invites you to think about feedback you have received at earlier points in your course and how you have responded to it in this new piece of work. Thinking carefully about the feedback you have received previously can help to improve your performance. It is helpful, too, for the marker to know what feedback you have had previously on similar pieces of work, and how you have tried to act on it. Knowing the range of different kinds of feedback you have had can also help us to use more those kinds that are most helpful to you.

Either in a comment on what you write here, or in their feedback to you, your marker will engage with your reflection. The extent to which you have improved on previous pieces of work will **NOT** affect your mark. Your work will be marked on the basis of its own merits as a piece of academic work, **NOT** on the basis of the answers you give in the box below. Instead, your response will help us to work with you to make feedback helpful.

What feedback have you received on earlier assessments, or while preparing this assessment?

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How have you responded to that feedback in this assessment?

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What feedback on this assessment would best help you think about your next one?

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Virtues, or dispositional (inherent) positive character traits have been an alternate viewpoint used to argue against, and occasionally alongside, many consequentialist (end determining) and deontic (rule based) theories (**Hursthouse, Pettigrove, 2018**). In addition to asking what types of traits should one aim to earn, the question ‘how does one obtain virtue?’ has remained a large debate in the normative moral sphere. I will describe Murdoch’s alternate

view of inward moral vision, including the attaining of these virtues through 'unselfing', before arguing against the concept of unselfing and removal of the ego.

Murdoch's account of virtue takes a different approach compared to many contemporary theorists, focusing on inner states; on how one should be more than how one should act. The development of one's morality comes in the "internal struggle" of perception and beliefs **(Murdoch, 1970; P22)**, where one's personal perception changes as a result of reducing the ego. Murdoch specifies this in response to many consequentialists who suggest that these abstract mental states do not matter as there is evidence of change within the person without some application of these mental states in actions **(Murdoch, 1970: P18)**. It seems unintuitive to suggest that there is no evidence for change, as perceptions can lead to natural changes that are shown in everyday decision making. To further emphasise this point, one must evaluate the order of morality, of the inner and outer states.

Murdoch places a specific value on the inner states compared to outer states, arguing that the perceptions and mental states one holds shapes and inhibits one's outer actions. For example, a greedy businessman who sees his staff purely as tools will not have the mental state to choose to treat his staff justly, as they are not seen as people but instead a means to a profitable end. The options presented are only available secondarily to the inner 'moral vision' one holds **(Murdoch, 1970, P89)**, and this moral vision is the foundation and main component of making moral choices throughout everyday life. Both the inner and outer must be evaluated together; by only focusing on the outer, Murdoch suggests one would

gain the concept of 'the will' (the desire to act) without any reasoning or substance behind the choice in actions. This ignores a large element of what morality and humanity is **(Murdoch, 1970; P15)**.

In order to change these actions, Murdoch suggests that our 'moral vision' must be both accurate through reducing the 'fat, relentless ego'. The natural ego is described as what blocks the moral vision, and leads to 'illusions' of self interest and natural selfishness **(Murdoch, 1970; P36, P51, P97)**. These illusions misconstrue the accuracy of the moral vision, and lead to non virtuous states of mind. Without these states of mind, seeing and performing virtuously is inaccessible. The ideal good is made available to us through 'seeing' the world as it really is, and lets one choose to see lovingly and justly **(Murdoch, 1970; P88)**. Murdoch describes this 'good' metaphorically as a 'sun' that illuminates the world, and as naturally moral beings this lets virtues be seen within its structure **(Murdoch, 1970; P90)**.

Murdoch uses the case of M and D to demonstrate how removal of the ego can lead to a more virtuous person **(Murdoch; 1970, P16)**. M is the mother-in-law of D, and initially does not approve of some of her behavioural traits. M sometimes sees D as brusque and rude. Through introspection, M is able to reposition her view by separating from the parts of her ego which cause her to believe that D is lower than her. By analysing her negative views that create the prejudice against D, M can choose to see accurately and lovingly instead of inaccurately and egotistically. M's internal attitude towards D changes to one of positivity, where previously seen traits like acting 'juvenile' and 'vulgar' are now viewed as 'youthful'

and 'spontaneous'. Murdoch specifies that in this case, M is changed by 'love and justice', instead of deluding herself against potentially negative acts. Murdoch does suggest that seeing the world 'correctly' (**Murdoch, 1970; P90**) is the true value of reducing the ego, and therefore accuracy takes precedence when using virtues. One cannot be virtuously deluded when seeing things accurately.

But how does one remove the ego? Murdoch uses the term "unselfing" (**Murdoch, 1970; P82**) to describe the act of separating oneself from the ego, and this act includes looking towards beauty instead of focusing on oneself. Murdoch uses the example of the kestrel to demonstrate the practicing of unselfing, stating that the focusing of this natural beauty can help alter ones perceptions and see reality as it is, instead of through the illusions presented by the ego. Murdoch refers to the beauties of nature and great art, and learning (**Murdoch, 1970, P83, P87**) as examples of unselfing activities.

However, this is where my first objection lies. The quality and efficiency of these activities seems somewhat disconnected from becoming virtuous. While great art that 'inspires love' through stories seems to be related closer to virtues as virtues are required in the creation of said art (**Murdoch, 1970, P84**), practices such as observing nature do not seem to link to more virtuous thought. Perhaps this can be reconciled through the belief that a clear mind, away from illusions, allows one to focus more on virtues. Regardless; the only direct connection to virtues is seen in the beauty of learning and the good itself, where unselfing and reflection on the virtues and questioning what makes a virtuous life can lead to an

understanding of the good. By directly focusing on virtues, one does not risk illusions in bad art or distractions of the mind in nature. It seems that much of this list is redundant, as unselfing is intrinsic within the act of reflection of virtues, requiring no ego in its process. Without this reflection, art and all other forms of unselfing seem to lose most their value. Under this view, I must assume all people have an inherent inner state that allows for reflection on the good. Murdoch may disagree with this, stating that nature could be an introduction into unselfing and understanding of the good. However, if one is unable to reflect directly on virtues, will they be able to reflect on the virtues from nature or art? I don't believe so.

Secondly, if one is to assume the reduction of ego is necessary through a unselfing, does this truly lead to a better life? Murdoch suggests that humans are naturally selfish, containing an internal system that aims to focus on self preservation and designed to 'protect the psyche' from pain (**Murdoch, 1970; P76**). From an initial perspective, this protection from pain sounds beneficial, allowing one to be protected from certain possible truths that might be detrimental to one's life. Affecting the wellbeing of one's internal states may lead to a situation just as potentially negative as one who contains a large ego. A reduction in the ego could lead to a form of hopeless nihilism, where one's own self worth and value of being an external agent may be tested beyond repair.

To exemplify this point, Murdoch suggests that 'the humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are' (**Murdoch, 1970; P102**). If the humble man sees

himself as nothing, then it seems logically consistent to suggest he sees others as nothing too. This could lead to this form of virtue-less nihilism based off the accuracy of the world.

It could be argued by Murdoch that this form of nihilism is a result of still looking egotistically. One must realise everything is pointless in relation to themselves, and this focus on themselves is a part of the ego. If M was to think, “What does it matter how I view D? My life is pointless”, then M’s ego and self focus on her life has clouded the moral vision she obtains. However, there are two issues within this interpretation. Firstly, no form of self reflection would be possible, including behaviour, due to ego. Secondly, Murdoch suggests that reduction of the ego leads to ‘accurate’ viewing of the world. If past a point of ego reduction the world is revealed as virtuous-less, then the reduction of ego is potentially dangerous to ‘the good’. The good is a function of the agents will (**Murdoch, 1970, P4**), and if the agent is tied to their mental states, then the ego may be a requirement in providing a mental state that allows for virtuous action. Being virtuous may only be an option through the ego.

In conclusion, the evidence presented to suggest that the ‘accurate’ view of the world is a virtuous one when perceived correctly seems lacking, especially when considering the potentially nihilistic response to removing one’s self importance from their lives. If this removal of ego is beneficial, then it seems impractical to look into nature and art when learning and reflecting on virtues directly is available.

Bibliography:

Hursthouse, R and Pettigrove, G. (2018) *Virtue Ethics*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Date Accessed = 28th January 2020, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/ethics-virtue/>>.

Murdoch, I. (1970) *The Sovereignty of Good*, Volume 7, Routledge Great Minds, New York,