

Learning to Wait

Simone Weil on Attention and Will

Seattle Applied Wisdom Lab
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Introduction

Simone Weil (1909–1943) was a French philosopher, activist, and mystic whose work explored the relationship between attention, truth, suffering, and the good. Although deeply influenced by Christianity, her writings reach far beyond any single religious tradition and continue to shape contemporary philosophy, psychology, and education.

We often assume that becoming a better person is primarily a matter of trying harder: exercising greater discipline, making better choices, or strengthening our will. But in the short essay that follows, Weil asks us to consider another possibility. What if genuine transformation depends less on force of will than on the quality of our attention?

As you read, try to resist the temptation to decide immediately whether Weil is right. Instead, treat the essay as an invitation to examine a familiar but elusive aspect of your own experience. Ask yourself not only *"Do I agree?"* but also *"What human experience is Weil trying to describe?"*

You may find that some of her claims initially seem strange or implausible. Rather than dismissing them, see if you can inhabit them provisionally. Philosophy often begins not by accepting a conclusion, but by patiently exploring a possibility.

As you read, consider:

- What does Weil mean by "attention"?
- How is attention different from will?
- Have you ever experienced the kind of attention she describes?
- If she is even partly right, what might change about how we think about learning, morality, or everyday life?

Attention and Will

Simone Weil

We do not need to discover new truths. Rather, through patience, effort, and method, we must come to understand self-evident truths with our whole being.

There are degrees of belief. Even the most ordinary truth, when it fills the whole soul, is like a revelation.

We should try to remedy our faults through attention, not through will.

The will has power only over certain movements of certain muscles, connected with our sense of moving nearby objects. I can decide to place my hand flat on the table. If inner purity, inspiration, or truth in thought were naturally linked to such movements, they too could be objects of the will. But they are not. We can only ask for them.

To ask for them is to believe that we have a Father in heaven. Or should we stop desiring them altogether? What could be worse? Inner supplication alone is reasonable, because it avoids tensing muscles that have nothing to do with the matter. What could be more foolish than tightening one's muscles or clenching one's jaw over virtue, poetry, or the solution to a problem? Attention is something altogether different.

Pride is just such a tightening. The proud person lacks grace—in both senses of the word. This is the effect of an error.

At its highest degree, attention is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.

Absolutely pure attention is prayer.

If we turn our intelligence toward the good, it is impossible that, little by little, the whole soul should not be drawn toward it, despite itself.

Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in human beings, and all extreme attention is religious. The amount of creative genius in an age is strictly proportional to the amount of extreme attention—and therefore of authentic religion—present in that age.

The Wrong Way to Seek

Attention fastened upon a problem. Another expression of the horror of emptiness. We cannot bear to think that our effort has been wasted. The frenzy of the hunt.

We must not want to find. As with excessive devotion, we become dependent on the object of our effort. We need an external reward, which chance sometimes provides, and we are prepared to accept it at the cost of distorting the truth.

Only effort without desire—effort not attached to an object—contains an unfailing reward.

Draw back from the object you are pursuing. Only what is indirect is effective. We accomplish nothing unless we have first stepped back.

By pulling on the bunch, we make the grapes fall to the ground.

Some efforts produce the opposite of the intended result: the bitterness of certain pious women, false forms of asceticism, certain forms of self-sacrifice, and so on. Other efforts are always useful, even when they do not succeed.

How are we to distinguish them?

Perhaps in this way: the first are accompanied by a false denial of our inner wretchedness. The others are accompanied by attention continually fixed upon the distance between what we are and what we love.

Love teaches gods and human beings alike, for no one learns without desiring to learn. Truth is sought not because it is truth, but because it is good.

Attention is bound up with desire. Not with will, but with desire—or, more precisely, with consent.

We release energy within ourselves, but it continually attaches itself again. How can it be released entirely?

We must desire that this be done in us. Truly desire it. Simply desire it, rather than trying to accomplish it. For every attempt of that kind is futile and must be dearly paid for.

In such a work, everything I call “I” must remain passive. Nothing is required of me but attention—an attention so complete that the “I” disappears. I must deprive everything I call “I” of the light of attention and redirect that light toward what cannot be conceived.

The capacity to dismiss a thought once and for all is the gateway to eternity.

The infinite in an instant.

In confronting temptation, we should imitate the perfectly chaste woman who, when the seducer speaks to her, gives no answer and pretends not to hear.

We must be indifferent to good and evil. But when we are indifferent—that is, when we cast the light of attention equally upon both—good prevails automatically.

This is essential grace.

And it is the definition, the criterion, of good.

A divine inspiration works infallibly and irresistibly, provided we do not turn our attention away from it or refuse it. There is no choice to be made in its favor. It is enough not to refuse to acknowledge that it is there.

Attention turned with love toward God—or, to a lesser degree, toward anything genuinely beautiful—renders certain actions impossible. Such is the non-acting action of prayer in the soul. Some forms of

conduct would veil this attention if they occurred; conversely, this attention itself makes them impossible.

As soon as we possess a point of eternity within the soul, nothing more is required than to preserve it, for it grows by itself, like a seed. We must keep an unmoving armed guard around it and nourish it through the contemplation of numbers and of fixed, exact relationships.

We nourish what is unchanging within the soul through the contemplation of what is unchanging in the body.

We write as a woman gives birth: we cannot help making the supreme effort. The same is true of action. I need not fear that I will fail to make the supreme effort, provided only that I do not lie to myself and that I pay attention.

The poet brings forth beauty by fixing attention upon reality. So too does the act of love. To know that this man, hungry and thirsty, truly exists just as much as I do—that is enough. The rest follows of itself.

The authentic and pure values of truth, beauty, and goodness in human activity arise from one and the same act: the complete application of attention to its object.

The sole purpose of education should be to prepare the possibility of such an act through the training of attention.

All other benefits of education are of no real importance.

Studies and Faith

Since prayer is nothing other than attention in its pure form, and study is a kind of training in attention, every school exercise should become a refraction of the spiritual life. But this requires a method.

A certain way of translating a Latin passage, a certain way of solving a geometry problem—and not just any way—constitutes a discipline of attention that prepares it for prayer.

A Method for Understanding Images and Symbols

Do not try to interpret them. Look at them until light breaks forth.

More generally, this is a method of exercising the intelligence: to look.

Applied to the task of distinguishing the real from the illusory, the method is this. In sense perception, if we are uncertain of what we see, we change our position while continuing to look, and reality reveals itself. In the inner life, time takes the place of space. We ourselves are changed by time, and if, through all those changes, we keep our gaze fixed upon the same thing, eventually illusion dissolves and reality appears. The condition is that attention remain a gaze rather than an attachment.

Whenever the will, bound to an obligation, struggles against a disordered desire, the energy devoted to the good is worn away. We must endure the bite of desire passively, as we would endure a suffering

through which we come to know our own wretchedness, while keeping our attention turned toward the good. Then there is an ascent in the scale of the qualities of energy.

Steal energy from desires by taking away their orientation toward time.

Our desires are infinite in their claims, yet limited by the energy from which they arise. That is why, with the help of grace, they can be mastered and, through being worn away, destroyed. Once we have clearly understood this, we have already won a virtual victory over them, provided we keep our attention in contact with this truth.

*Video meliora...*¹

In such states, it seems that we think the good—and in one sense we do—but we do not think its possibility.

The emptiness we grasp in the jaws of contradiction is unquestionably the emptiness from above, for we grasp it all the more firmly the more we sharpen our natural faculties of intelligence, will, and love. The emptiness from below is the one into which we fall when we allow those natural faculties to wither.

The experience of the transcendent seems contradictory. Yet the transcendent can be known only through contact, since our faculties cannot produce it.

Solitude

What, then, gives solitude its value? We are, after all, in the presence of mere matter—even the sky, the stars, the moon, the flowering trees—things perhaps of less value than a human spirit. Its value lies in the greater possibility of attention. If only we could attend to another human being with the same degree of attention...

There is only one thing we can know about God: that He is what we are not. Our wretchedness alone is His image. The more deeply we contemplate it, the more deeply we contemplate Him.

Sin is nothing other than failure to recognize human wretchedness. It is wretchedness that remains unconscious and is therefore culpable. The story of Christ is experimental proof that human wretchedness is irreducible—that in a man entirely without sin, it is just as great as in the sinner. It is simply illuminated.

Knowledge of human wretchedness is difficult for the rich and the powerful, because they are almost irresistibly inclined to believe that they are something. It is equally difficult for the destitute, because they are almost irresistibly inclined to believe that the rich and the powerful are something.

It is not the fault itself that constitutes mortal sin, but the degree of light present in the soul when the fault—whatever it may be—is committed.

Purity is the power to contemplate impurity.

1 Ovid's famous line: *Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor* ("I see the better and approve it, but follow the worse.")

Perfect purity can contemplate both the pure and the impure. Impurity can contemplate neither: the former frightens it, the latter absorbs it.

It requires a mixture.