

## Call for Papers

The Self and the Selfless: Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil on Individual Action in Dark Times.

### Presentation

#### **Attention as a site of resistance: Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil on the inner origins of freedom**

Greetings. I am Paolo Monti, I am an Assistant Professor of Moral Philosophy based in Milan and I am here to talk about “Attention as a site of resistance” in both Arendt and Simone Weil. I am going to argue that the concept of attention plays an important role in their investigation of the inner origins of freedom, especially in the face of threats of authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

But why attention, you may wonder?

In the last decade, the impact of social media on the public sphere of democratic societies has encouraged a debate on emerging new forms of manipulation of the public opinion. In a digital “regime of visibility”, to use Marie-José Mondzain suggestive concept, what counts is not the ability to fabricate and disseminate claims, images and symbols, since this ability is now widely available to almost anybody. What does count is rather the capacity to orient the public’s attention towards specific claims, images and symbols over others. The social media are, in this sense, grand technologies of attention that train the gaze of an immense public worldwide and then resell it for commercial and political purposes.

The access to this flow of information and communication that is offered by the digital public sphere is ubiquitous and pervasive. It is not by chance that nowadays we are seeing a resurgence of consideration for meditation practices, mindfulness and the rich Buddhist traditions that so much have to contribute to our understanding of self-awareness and how much it impacts our relationship with the world and the others. In a time when our attention is constantly overburdened and divided, the ability to re-train oneself to focus becomes extremely desirable.

Now, it should not be denied that the new digital public sphere does come, indeed, with some promising democratic potential for free speech and participation. The massive trend of disintermediation that it produces puts for the first time almost anyone in a position to raise important claims and reach for a vast audience. In the mind of many, especially in the field of deliberative democracy, this looked indeed like an amazing chance to pursue in practice an ideal of political transparency and the aspiration to a truly global public sphere of conversation and deliberation, universally open to all those who wish to partake in it. Something consistent with the ideal of the public use of reason so cherished by the tradition of the Enlightenment.

However, as recent political trends have shown, populist movements, authoritarian leaders and conspiracy theorists have been, in fact, particularly effective at exploiting these new systems worldwide. Their communication is convenient to the inner workings of social media, as the populist style of simplification, emotionalization, and negativity operates in tune with the dopamine driven feedback mechanisms upon which these platforms rely. Populist and manipulative speech performs very efficiently in this new kind of “attention economy”, whereas experts and traditional information providers struggle and are regarded with suspicion.

This has created an unsettling situation and led many observers to speak of a crisis of democracy, as the traditional institutions of representative democracy struggled to adapt and in several countries around the globe populist movements rose to power.

Attention, then, and its management and its quality look like, now, perhaps more than ever, a crucial concept to look into for all those who are concerned with the future of democracy.

The concept of attention has a significant presence in Hannah Arendt's and Simone Weil's works, and it is noteworthy that in both authors it appears substantially, although differently, related to the origins of free agency.

In *Gravity and Grace* and *Waiting for God*, Simone Weil famously presents the education of individual attention as a renunciation to the superficial illusions of will and choice to connect with a solitary and purified form of desire, a selfless and receptive disposition towards truth, beauty, and goodness.

From Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

That action is good which we are able to accomplish while keeping our attention and intention totally directed towards pure and impossible goodness, without veiling from ourselves by any falsehood either the attraction or the impossibility of pure goodness. In this way virtue is entirely analogous to artistic inspiration. The beautiful poem is the one which is composed while the attention is kept directed towards inexpressible inspiration, in so far as it is inexpressible. Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.

The attention turned with love towards God (or in a lesser degree, towards anything which is truly beautiful) makes certain things impossible for us. Such is the non-acting action of prayer in the soul. There are ways of behaviour which would veil such attention should they be indulged in and which, reciprocally, this attention puts out of the question.

Attention thus, according to Simone Weil, generates a "non-acting action", an elevated kind of individual agency that is detached from the fatal mechanisms of social idolatry and eludes the prejudices and reactions of the multitude.

From Weil, *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*

The goal of a political party is something vague and unreal. If it were real, it would demand a great effort of attention, for the mind does not easily encompass the concept of the public interest. Conversely, the existence of the party is something concrete and obvious; it is perceived without any effort. Therefore, unavoidably, the party becomes in fact its own end. This then amounts to idolatry, for God alone is legitimately his own end. The transition is easily achieved.

It is impossible to examine the frightfully complex problems of public life while attending to, on the one hand, truth, justice and the public interest, and, on the other, maintaining the attitude that is expected of members of a political movement. The human attention span is limited – it does not allow for simultaneous consideration of these two concerns. In fact, whoever would care for the one is bound to neglect the other.

True attention is a state so difficult for any human creature, so violent, that any emotional disturbance can derail it. Therefore, one must always endeavour strenuously to protect one's inner faculty of judgment against the turmoil of personal hopes and fears.

The fruit of attention is love, but it needs to be cultivated in solitude and through careful studies, whose higher purpose is not to accumulate knowledge but rather to train our disposition to being fully attentive.

From Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

Solitude. Where does its value lie? For in solitude we are in the presence of mere matter (even the sky, the stars, the moon, trees in blossom), things of less value (perhaps) than a human spirit. Its value lies in the greater possibility of attention. If we could be attentive to the same degree in the presence of a human being...

In Hannah Arendt's thought, the concept of attention is less prominent, but nonetheless finds its way into late writings, especially *The Life of the Mind*. According to her analysis of Augustine, attention is the result of a special interaction between will and intellect through which the self comes to properly connect sensations and reality and to jointly understand past, present and future, thus escaping the incessant flow of fleeting impressions and desires.

From Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

We can see without perceiving, and hear without listening, as frequently happens when we are absent-minded. The "attention of the mind" is needed to transform sensation into perception; the Will that "fixes the sense on that thing which we see and binds both together" is essentially different from the seeing eye and the visible object.

In other words, the Will, by virtue of attention, first unites our sense organs with the real world in a meaningful way, and then drags, as it were, this outside world into ourselves and prepares it for further mental operations: to be remembered, to be understood, to be asserted or denied. For the inner images are by no means mere illusions.

This Will could indeed be understood as "the spring of action"; by directing the senses' attention, presiding over the images impressed on memory, and providing the intellect with material for understanding, the Will prepares the ground on which action can take place.

Significantly, this exercise of attention, envisioned by classical authors as best realized in thinking solitude, shapes the capacity of judgment that is crucial to resist the threat of thoughtlessness and the banality of evil it produces. In *Responsibility and Judgment*, Arendt observes that what Eichmann specifically lacked was, indeed, a "thinking attention". inconsistencies and flagrant contradictions in examination and cross-examinations during the trial had not bothered him.

From Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*

Cliches, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of **protecting us against reality**, that is, **against the claim on our thinking attention** which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. **If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted**; the difference in **Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all**.

This total absence of thinking attracted my interest. Is evil-doing, not just the sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely “base motives” (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition? [...] Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought?

Now that we have briefly explore Weil’s and Arendt’s consideration of attention, we must certainly note that their two perspectives differ in some relevant ways.

For Weil, attention is shaped as a selfless reception, a hollowing of human faculties that by renouncing their activity become open to what is highest. This operates a deliverance, both ethical and political, which is outright impossible to achieve as an active effort of reason and will (the mistake, in Weil’s mind, of the political project of the Enlightenment).

It is supernatural love that is free. In trying to force it, one substitutes for it a natural love. Conversely, however, freedom without supernatural love – that of 1789 – is entirely empty, a simple abstraction, with no possibility of ever becoming real.

For Arendt, thinking attention is connected to ethical and political freedom as it is part of that uniting effort of the self that actively gathers itself around its object and its able to formulate a thoughtful judgement. Something thoughtless men, like Eichmann, seem to have lost the ability to do altogether.

From Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem

Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.

That said, though, now that these difference have been duly noted, I suggest we can also acknowledge that their two perspectives hold striking similarities. Essentially, they both frame a meaningful connection between the exercise of attention and the ability to resist against the evilness of authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

This convergence is rooted on their compatible view about the inner workings of the totalitarian machine. Roberto Esposito, in the *The Origin of the Political*, has appropriately noted:

For both authors, this machine tends toward the annihilation of human presence via the double yet combined procedure of the derealization of that which exists, in conjunction with the ideological construction of a world that is so false that the real appears to be unbelievable. Once deprived of any notion of reality, men are ready for the experience of uprooting and subsequent deportation that consequently allows totalitarianism to reach its ultimate goal; that is, to treat them like things in order to render them “superfluous.”

Both authors explain that this is made possible through the arrest of thought— Weil expresses it more specifically in terms of the faculty of attention— which brings about a collapse in the boundary between good and evil that is specifically designed to render each category the mirror image of the other.

Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political. Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?*, Fordham University Press 2017, p. 3

For Weil, freedom is a form of supernatural love that delivers us from the pulls and fixations of superficial choice and reaction. For Arendt, freedom stems from the active exercise of our capacity of judgment. But for both, a suspension of attention coincides with the triumph of un-freedom and constitutes the premise of moral collapse and political tyranny. A lesson for our times, as it was for theirs. Thank you.



## Quotes for paper

From Arendt, Responsibility and Judgment

Considering what his last words should be in case of a death sentence, which he had expected all along, this simple fact had not occurred to him, just as inconsistencies and flagrant contradictions in examination and cross-examinations during the trial had not bothered him. Cliches, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of **protecting us against reality**, that is, **against the claim on our thinking attention** which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. **If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted**; the difference in **Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.**

This total absence of thinking attracted my interest. Is evil-doing, not just the sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely “base motives” (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being “determined to prove a villain,” *not* a necessary condition for evil-doing? Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought?

From Arendt, The Life of the Mind

If, as I suggested before, the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to “demand” its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be. Kant—in this respect almost alone among the philosophers—was much bothered by the common opinion that philosophy is only for the few, precisely because of its moral implications, and he once observed that “stupidity is caused by a wicked heart.”<sup>21</sup> This is not true: absence of thought is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and a wicked heart is not its cause; it is probably the other way round, that wickedness may be caused by absence of thought. In any event, the matter can no longer be left to “specialists” as though thinking, like higher mathematics, were the monopoly of a specialized discipline.

he Will's binding force functions not only in purely mental activity; it is manifest also in sense perception. This element of the mind is what makes sensation meaningful: In every act of vision, says Augustine, we must “distinguish the following three things...the object which we see...and this can naturally exist before it is seen; secondly, the vision which was not there before we perceived the object...and thirdly the power that fixes the sense of sight on the object...namely, the attention of the mind.” Without the latter, a function of the Will, we have only sensory “impressions” without any actual perceiving of them; an object is seen only when we concentrate our mind on the perception. We can see without perceiving, and hear without listening, as frequently happens when we are absent-minded. The “attention of the mind” is needed to transform sensation into perception; the Will that “fixes the sense on that thing which we see and binds both together” is essentially different from the seeing eye and the visible object; it is mind and not body.<sup>100</sup>

Moreover, by fixing our mind on what we see or hear, we tell our memory what to remember and our intellect what to understand, what objects to go after in search of knowledge. Memory and intellect have withdrawn from outside appearances and deal not with these themselves (the real tree) but with images (the seen tree), and these images clearly are inside us. In other words, the Will, by virtue of attention, first unites our sense organs with the real world in a meaningful way, and then drags, as it were, this outside world into ourselves and prepares it for further mental operations: to be remembered, to be understood, to be asserted or denied. For the inner images are by no means mere illusions. “Concentrating exclusively on the inner phantasies and turning the mind’s eye completely away from the bodies which surround our senses,” we come “upon so striking a likeness of the bodily species expressed from memory” that it is hard to tell whether we are seeing or merely imagining. “So great is the power of the mind over its body” that sheer imagination “can arouse the genital organs.”<sup>101</sup> And this power of the mind is due not to the Intellect and not to Memory but only to the Will that unites the mind’s inwardness with the outward world. Man’s privileged position within the Creation, in the outward world, is due to the mind which “imagines within, yet imagines things that are from without. For no one could use these things [of the outward world]...unless the images of sensible things were retained in the memory, and unless...the same will [were] adapted both to bodies without and to their images within.”<sup>102</sup>

This Will as the unifying force binding man’s sensory apparatus to the outside world and then joining together man’s different mental faculties has two characteristics that were entirely absent from the various descriptions we have had of the Will up to now. This Will could indeed be understood as “the spring of action”; by directing the senses’ attention, presiding over the images impressed on memory, and providing the intellect with material for understanding, the Will prepares the ground on which action can take place. This Will, one is tempted to say, is so busy preparing action that it hardly has time to get caught in the controversy with its own counter-will. “And just as in man and woman there is one flesh of two, so the one nature of the mind [the Will] embraces our intellect and action, or our council and execution...so as it was said of those: They shall be two in one flesh,’ so it can be said of these [the inward and the outward man]: ‘Two in one mind.’”

In Augustine, as well as later in Duns Scotus, the solution of the Will’s inner conflict comes about through a transformation of the Will itself, its transformation into *Love*. The Will—seen in its functional operative aspect as a coupling, binding agent—can also be defined as Love (*voluntas: amor seu di-lectio*<sup>105</sup>), for Love is obviously the most successful coupling agent. In Love, there are again “three things: he that loves, and that which is loved, and Love.... [Love] is a certain life which couples...together two things, namely, him that loves and that which is loved.”<sup>106</sup> In the same way, Will qua attention was needed to effect perception by coupling together the one with eyes to see and that which is visible; it is only that the uniting force of love is stronger. For what love unites is “marvelously glued together” so that there is a cohesion between lover and the beloved—“*cohaerunt enim mirabiliter glutino amoris*”<sup>107</sup> The great advantage of the transformation is not only Love’s greater force in uniting what remains separate—when the Will uniting “the form of the body that is seen and its image which arises in the sense, that is, the vision...is so violent that [it keeps the sense *fixed* on the vision once it has been formed], it can be called love, or desire, or passion”<sup>108</sup>—but also that love, as distinguished from will and desire, is not extinguished when it reaches its goal but enables the mind “to remain *steadfast* in order to *enjoy*” it.

Practical reason is needed to come to the aid of desire under certain conditions. “Desire is influenced by what is just at hand,” thus easily obtainable—a suggestion carried by the very word used for appetite or desire, *orexis*, whose primary meaning, from *orego*, indicates the stretching out of one’s hand to reach for something nearby. Only when the fulfillment of a desire lies in the future and has to take the time factor into account is practical reason needed and stimulated by it. In the case of incontinence, it is the force of desire for what is close at hand that leads to incontinence, and here practical reason will intervene out of concern for future



consequences. But men do not only desire what is close at hand; they are able to imagine objects of desire to secure which they need to calculate the appropriate means. It is this future imagined object of desire that stimulates practical reason; as far as the resulting motion, the act itself, is concerned, the desired object is the beginning, while for the calculating process the same object is the end of the movement.

This proof of the freedom of the Will draws exclusively on an inner power of affirmation or negation that has nothing to do with any actual *posse* or *potestas*—the faculty needed to perform the Will's commands. The proof obtains its plausibility from a comparison of willing with reason, on the one hand, and with the desires, on the other, neither of which can be said to be free. (We saw that Aristotle introduced his *proairesis* to avoid the dilemma of saying either that the "good man" *forces* himself away from his appetites or that the "base man" *forces* himself away from his reason.) Whatever reason tells me is compelling as far as reason is concerned. I may be able to say "No" to a truth disclosed to me, but I cannot possibly do this on rational grounds. The appetites rise in my body automatically, and my desires are aroused by objects outside myself; I may say "No" to them on the advice given by reason or the law of God, but reason itself does not move me to resistance.

From Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

There remains, however, one fundamental problem, which was implicitly present in all these postwar trials and which must be mentioned here because it touches upon one of the central moral questions of all time, namely upon the nature and function of human judgment. What we have demanded in these trials, where the defendants had committed "legal" crimes, is that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own judgment, which, moreover, happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all those around them. And this question is all the more serious as we know that the few who were "arrogant" enough to trust only their own judgment were by no means identical with those persons who continued to abide by old values, or who were guided by a religious belief. Since the whole of respectable society had in one way or another succumbed to Hitler, the moral maxims which determine social behavior and the religious commandments – "Thou shalt not kill!" – which guide conscience had virtually vanished. Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.

How troubled men of our time are by this question of judgment (or, as is often said, by people who dare "sit in judgment") has emerged in the controversy over the present book

From Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*

1 The "magic spell" that Hitler cast over his listeners has been acknowledged many times, latterly by the publishers of *Hitler's Tischgespräche*, Bonn, 1951 (*Hitler's Table Talks*, American edition, New York, 1953; quotations from the original German edition). This fascination—"the strange magnetism that radiated from Hitler in such a compelling manner"—rested indeed "on the fanatical belief of this man in himself

(introduction by Gerhard Ritter, p. 14), on his pseudo-authoritative judgments about everything under the sun, and on the fact that his opinions—whether they dealt with the harmful effects of smoking or with Napoleon's policies—could always be fitted into an all-encompassing ideology. Fascination is a social phenomenon, and the fascination Hitler exercised over his environment must be understood in terms of the particular company he kept. Society is always prone to accept a person offhand for what he pretends to be, so that a crackpot posing as a genius always has a certain chance to be believed. In modern society, with its characteristic lack of discerning judgment, this tendency is strengthened, so that someone who not only holds opinions but also presents them in a tone of unshakable conviction will not so easily forfeit his prestige, no matter how many times he has been demonstrably wrong. Hitler, who knew the modern chaos of opinions from first-hand experience, discovered that the helpless seesawing between various opinions and "the conviction ... that everything is balderdash" (p. 281) could best be avoided by adhering to *one* of the many current opinions with "unbending consistency." The hair-raising arbitrariness of such fanaticism holds great fascination for society because for the duration of the social gathering it is freed from the chaos of opinions that it constantly generates. This "gift" of fascination, however, has only social relevance; it is so prominent in the *Tischgespräche* because here Hitler played the game of society and was not speaking to his own kind but to the generals of the Wehrmacht, all of whom more or less belonged to "society." To believe that Hitler's successes were based on his "powers of fascination" is altogether erroneous; with those qualities alone he would have never advanced beyond the role of a prominent figure in the salons.

From R. Esposito, *L'Origine della Politica*

Per entrambe essa tende a un annientamento della presenza umana attraverso un doppio procedimento combinato di derealizzazione di ciò che esiste e di costruzione ideologica di un mondo a tal punto finto da rendere quello reale incredibile. Una volta privati del senso della realtà, gli uomini sono pronti per quel processo di sradicamento - e poi di deportazione - in cui il totalitarismo raggiunge infine il suo scopo ultimo: quello di trattarli come cose e di renderli «superflui». Come ciò sia possibile è spiegato sia dall'una sia dall'altra con un blocco dell'attività del pensiero - la Weil parla più specificamente della facoltà di attenzione - che produce quella caduta di confini tra male e bene destinata a fare dell'uno la copia rovesciata dell'altro. Da questo lato le concordanze tra le due analisi si fanno addirittura letterali: il male non ha nulla di radicale, di profondo, di mostruoso. E' «banale», come si esprime la Arendt (B.M.), o «incolore, monotono, arido, noioso» (Q, 1°, 391), «desertico» (Q, 1°, 395), «superficiale» (Q, 2°, 303), nei termini della Weil. Esso è sempre «normale», nel senso preciso che ritiene di rispondere a una norma, a una legge, che esso stesso ha fissato nella forma di un simulacro terreno dell'assoluto<sup>4</sup>. Se si leggono in controluce le pagine arendtiane sulla «morale» di Eichmann con quelle weiliane sull'idolatria totalitaria la sovrapposizione categoriale appare perfetta. Eppure anche in questo caso - e proprio in esso - non bisogna lasciarsi trascinare da un effetto di identificazione oltre un certo punto infondato e ingannevole. Qual è questo punto? Non alludo tanto alle vistose divergenze d'ordine storiografico attinenti alla ricostruzione genetica del totalitarismo: il differente ruolo assegnato alla società di massa, all'imperialismo o al nazionalismo<sup>5</sup>. La questione assai più rilevante - perché mette in gioco l'intera fisionomia dei due apparati concettuali - è piuttosto un'altra. Vale a dire la specificità del sistema totalitario rispetto al suo passato più recente - la modernità - e meno recente. E' questo il punto in cui i due itinerari interpretativi si separano bruscamente. E anzi - come s'è già detto - si mostrano fin dall'inizio orientati da ipotesi ermeneutiche profondamente contrastanti.

From Weil, On the Abolition of All Political Parties

The goal of a political party is something vague and unreal. If it were real, it would demand a great effort of attention, for the mind does not easily encompass the concept of the public interest. Conversely, the existence of the party is something concrete and obvious; it is perceived without any effort. Therefore, unavoidably, the party becomes in fact its own end. This then amounts to idolatry, for God alone is legitimately his own end. The transition is easily achieved. First, an axiom is set: for the party to ser

It is when we desire truth with an empty soul and without attempting to guess its content that we receive the light. Therein resides the entire mechanism of attention.

It is impossible to examine the frightfully complex problems of public life while attending to, on the one hand, truth, justice and the public interest, and, on the other, maintaining the attitude that is expected of members of a political movement. The human attention span is limited – it does not allow for simultaneous consideration of these two concerns. In fact, whoever would care for the one is bound to neglect the other.

Yet no suffering befalls whoever relinquishes justice and truth, whereas the party system has painful penalties to chastise insubordination. These penalties extend into all areas of life: career, affections, friendship, reputation, the external aspect of honour, sometimes even family life. The Communist Party developed this system to perfection.

Even for those who do not compromise their inner integrity, the existence of such penalties unavoidably distorts their judgment. If they try to react against party control, this very impulse to react is itself unrelated to the truth, and as such should be suspect; and so, in turn, should be this suspicion . . . True attention is a state so difficult for any human creature, so violent, that any emotional disturbance can derail it. Therefore, one must always endeavour strenuously to protect one's inner faculty of judgment against the turmoil of personal hopes and fears.

From Weil, Gravity and Grace

It is supernatural love that is free. In trying to force it, one substitutes for it a natural love. Conversely, however, freedom without supernatural love—that of 1789—is entirely empty, a simple abstraction, with no possibility of ever becoming real.

We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give to God—in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish—only the destruction of the 'I'.

Except the seed die. . . . It has to die in order to liberate the energy it bears within it so that with this energy new forms may be developed.

So we have to die in order to liberate a tied up energy, in order to possess an energy which is free and capable of understanding the true relationship of things.

That action is good which we are able to accomplish while keeping our attention and intention totally directed towards pure and impossible goodness, without veiling from ourselves by any falsehood either the attraction or the impossibility of pure goodness.

In this way virtue is entirely analogous to artistic inspiration. The beautiful poem is the one which is composed while the attention is kept directed towards inexpressible inspiration, in so far as it is inexpressible.

All true good carries with it conditions which are contradictory and as a consequence is impossible. He who keeps his attention really fixed on this impossibility and acts will do what is good.

We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will. The will only controls a few movements of a few muscles, and these movements are associated with the idea of the change of position of near-by objects. I can will to put my hand flat on the table. If inner purity, inspiration or truth of thought were necessarily associated with attitudes of this kind, they might be the object of will. As this is not the case, we can only beg for them. To beg for them is to believe that we have a Father in heaven. Or should we cease to desire them? What could be worse? Inner supplication is the only reasonable way, for it avoids stiffening muscles which have nothing to do with the matter. What could be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem. Attention is something quite different.

Pride is a tightening up of this kind. There is a lack of grace (we can give the word its double meaning here) in the proud man. It is the result of a mistake.

Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as

prayer. It presupposes faith and love.  
Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.

Love is the teacher of gods and men, 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 the will but with desire—or more exactly, consent.

We liberate energy in ourselves, but it constantly reattaches itself. How are we to liberate it entirely? We have to desire that it should be done in us—to desire it truly—simply to desire it, not to try to accomplish it. For every attempt in that direction is vain and has to be dearly paid for. In such a work all that I call 'I' has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived.

We should be indifferent to good and evil but, when we are indifferent, that is to say when we project the light of our attention equally on both, the good gains the day. This phenomenon comes about automatically. There lies the essential grace. And it is the definition, the criterion of good.

A divine inspiration operates infallibly, irresistibly, if we do not turn away our attention, if we do not refuse it. There is not a choice to be made in its favour, it is enough not to refuse to recognize that it exists.

The attention turned with love towards God (or in a lesser degree, towards anything which is truly beautiful) makes certain things impossible for us. Such is the non-acting action of prayer in the soul. There are ways of behaviour which would veil such attention should they be indulged in and which, reciprocally, this attention puts out of the question.

The authentic and pure values—truth, beauty and goodness—in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act.

All the other advantages of instruction are without interest. Studies and faith. Prayer being only attention in its pure form and studies being a form of gymnastics of the attention, each school exercise should be a refraction of spiritual life. There

must be method in it. A certain way of doing a Latin prose, a certain way of tackling a problem in geometry (and not just any way) make up a system of gymnastics of the attention calculated to give it a greater aptitude for prayer.

Solitude. Where does its value lie? For in solitude we are in the presence of mere matter (even the sky, the stars, the moon, trees in blossom), things of less value (perhaps) than a human spirit. Its value lies in the greater possibility of attention. If we could be attentive to the same degree in the presence of a human being . .

The attention turned with love towards God (or in a lesser degree, towards anything which is truly beautiful) makes certain things impossible for us. Such is the non-acting action of prayer in the soul. There are ways of behaviour which would veil such attention should they be indulged in and which, reciprocally, this attention puts out of the question.

### From Weil, Waiting for God

I  
recited the Our Father in Greek every day before work,  
and I repeated it very often in the vineyard.  
Since that time I have made a practice of saying it through  
once each morning with absolute attention. If during the  
recitation MY attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the  
minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded  
in going through it with absolutely pure attention. Sometimes  
it comes about that I say it again out of sheer pleasure,  
but I only do it if I really feel the impulse.

The effect of this practice is extraordinary and surprises  
me every time, for, although I experience it each day, it  
exceeds MY expectation at each repetition.

At times the very first words tear MY thoughts from MY  
body and transport it to a place outside space where there  
is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the  
ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity  
to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same  
time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is  
silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which

is the object of a positive sensation, MORE positive than that  
of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing  
this silence.  
Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments,  
Christ is present with me in person, but his presence  
is infinitely MORE real, more moving, more clear than on

that first occasion when he took possession of me.

The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.

The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it.

The highest part of the attention only makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established; but the whole attention is turned toward God.

Of course school exercises only develop a lower kind of attention. Nevertheless, they are extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer, on condition that they are carried out with a view to this purpose and this purpose alone.

Although people seem to be unaware of it today, the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.