

**What, if anything, of  
philosophical value, can  
we take from Weil's  
work on attention?**

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## Introduction

I shall in this essay argue that we can extract a philosophical value from Weil's work on attention if we see her work as an instruction<sup>78</sup> to philosophy as a praxis. This shall be demonstrated in the following manner: first, I outline Weil's concept of attention and contrast it with her concept of force as this is presented in Weil's *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*. Second, I consider and settle objections to how Weil's concept of 'attention' is of philosophical value. I conclude that we can extract a philosophical value from Weil's work on attention which instructs and preserves philosophy as an intellectual endeavour. Finally, I suggest along with Bourgault (2017, 270) and many others that attention as an instructive practice is particularly valuable in the context in which this essay is written and read<sup>79</sup>. In doing so, I take on a practical approach, focusing entirely on philosophy as a praxis and Weil's work on the concept of attention as an instruction to this praxis. The thesis I set out to defend is this: Weil's work of attention has a philosophical value of a practical kind: it instructs and preserves philosophy as an intellectual praxis. On this practical approach, I take any instruction which improves, develops, or protects this praxis to be of philosophical value and any instruction which hinders, threatens, or corrupts it to be of no philosophical value. For instance, I take censorship to be of no philosophical value. However, on a non-practical approach censorship might indeed be of philosophical value because philosophical analyses which could contribute to philosophy as an intellectual discipline could be made on the concept of censorship. However, in this essay, I focus on the concept of attention as an instruction. More specifically, I focus on how it instructs the philosophical agent in her intellectual pursuit of truth, thus focusing on contemplation<sup>80</sup> and the relationship to truth. In sum, I argue that attention is philosophically valuable as an instructive practice that preserves philosophy as an intellectual endeavour since "intelligence [...is] largely a matter of attention" (Bourgault 2017, 255-6) and since "attention can reveal" (Snively 2017, 112).

### 1. Attention

I understand Weil's concept of attention to be a mental practice in which an agent refrains from letting her will or desires be projected onto the object of her thought in order that the object can penetrate the agent's thought rather than the agent's will or desires penetrate the object (thereby

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<sup>78</sup> A 'prescription rather than a description' (Snively 2017, 109)

<sup>79</sup> A "neo-liberal temporal regim[e]" (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 169)

<sup>80</sup> I take contemplation to be important if not crucial to philosophical enquiry, 'attention' to be preserving of and instructive for contemplation, and 'force' obstructive to it.

producing a misconception of it) (WFG 62, 112-113), (Snively 2017, 110). The aim<sup>81</sup> of this practice is then a “suspended, patient openness” relying on the agent renouncing her will in order to see the object in its purest form<sup>82</sup> (Jesson 2017, 158). To reach this state of patient openness in which the agent can contemplate the object of her thought, attention is practised by quietly<sup>83</sup> making oneself open to the world and thereby receptive to it (WFG 50, 68-9, 96). If practised correctly, attention can give the agent a better chance of understanding the world<sup>84</sup>, since with it the agent “can penetrate the kingdom of truth reserved for genius” (WFG 64) and ‘acknowledge [her] cognitive limits’ (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 186<sup>85</sup>). Despite its seemingly ‘passive tunes’, attention is not passivity. Rather, it is a “negative effort” or a refraining from doing something (WFG 111). For instance, when Weil instructs us to “suspend thought” (WFG 111), she is not instructing us to do nothing, but to do something, namely, to suspend something. Attention is then a form of “inactive action” (GG 45), whereby the agent makes one effort to not make another effort. The best example of attention successfully employed is Weil herself. Compared to her brother she was no genius<sup>86</sup>, but with attention, she could acknowledge her cognitive limitations and cross these and enter the same “kingdom” as him (WFG 64), (Bourgault 2017, 261). Importantly, Weil argues that it was not her alone who could or can use attention in this way, but that it was a capacity available to “any individual who desires truth” (Bourgault 2017, 261). It is this understanding of Weil’s concept of attention that I argue<sup>87</sup> is of philosophical value because it instructs philosophy the praxis in way that preserves it and particularly so today. In fact, it does so in at least two senses. First, it allows any relevantly interested individual access to “the kingdom of truth” and second, it allows privileged access, because the attentive agent, unlike the willing or forcing agent, receives the object of contemplation unaltered or more perfect (Jesson 2017, 160).

This is seen in the example of a girl solving an arithmetic problem (Thomas 2020, 150). According to Weil, “if she fails, the error bears the mark of her personality” whereas if she succeeds “her person is absent from the whole operation” (Weil 2015, 108). Attention then is a practice that

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<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, attention is aimed at prayer and religious revelation, yet it can be practised for non-religious ends as well (GG 59, 132), (Snively 2017, 109, 112-3, 120) and is instructive “of all human life, philosophical life included” (Snively 2017, 122).

<sup>82</sup> i.e., without prejudices, will, desires, etc. smudging it.

<sup>83</sup> She does not utter ‘I will make myself open’ whether publicly, privately, or entirely privately (in her mind).

<sup>84</sup> And whatever it contains (people, thoughts, objects, etc.)

<sup>85</sup> Thus bringing to mind the motivation for Locke’s Essay that men did not “exten[d] their Enquiries beyond their Capacities” (Locke, Essay, I, 1, 7, 47). Such connections stress that while Weil’s philosophy might be “subterranean” it is philosophy nonetheless (Thomas 2020, 146).

<sup>86</sup> Weil’s own verdict (WFG, 38-39, 64)

<sup>87</sup> Along with Bourgault and Rancière (Bourgault 2017, 261)

instructs, preserves, and supports philosophical praxis, since when practised correctly, it gives the agent the capacity “to seize hold of its object [of thought]” (McCullough 2017, 303) in a clear view that something like force does not. Force is not the opposite of attention<sup>88</sup>, but an unpreferable alternative to it. Force corrupts, obstructs and ultimately “kill[s]” the ability to think (Weil 2007, 379-80, 386, 388-90). For instance, Weil writes that “the possessor of force” lacks “the tiny interval that is reflection” (Weil 2007, 380) and that it is only when Hector is stripped of “force, [that] he discovers” (Weil 2007, 384). Compare this to attention which enables “a refined and honest perception of what is really the case” (Murdoch 1970, 37), (WFG 68-9) and it becomes apparent that attention preserves philosophical praxis whereas force threatens it.

I now turn to consider two sets of concerns that might be made to my argument that Weil’s concept of attention is valuable as an instruction to the praxis of philosophy. First, I consider a set of Sartrean concerns that attention as instruction is confused and inauspicious. Second, I consider the objection that Weil’s suspicion of intellect and language effectively makes philosophy as a praxis impossible.

## 2. Sartrean Concerns

2.1. According to Murdoch, someone sympathetic to Sartre’s philosophy will favour those instructions that instruct and involve “a solitary, omnipotent, will” and connect “the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable” (Murdoch 1970, 8-9). The Sartrean will accordingly be antipathetic to Weil’s instruction since Weil specifically instructs that when paying attention, the agent should not aim at a solution (WFG 112-3, 196). This does not sound promising to the Sartrean. Where Weil’s instruction is ambiguous, Sartre’s is straightforward<sup>12</sup>: “every action must be intentional; each action must, in fact, have an end” (Sartre 2001, 181). Prima facie, Sartre’s instruction sounds preferable to Weil’s because it includes an intentional will and is less ambiguous. Indeed, why prefer an ambiguous notion (Weil’s) to an unambiguous one (Sartre’s)?

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<sup>88</sup> This is reserved for ‘contempt’ (Weil 1973, 153) <sup>12</sup> Not simple.

2.2. To this concern, I would concede that Weil's instruction is not as clear as Sartre's. However, I would argue that its lack of clarity does not provide us with any good reason for preferring Sartre's instruction to Weil's, because if we follow Weil's instruction, then not only will a solution eventually offer itself, but a more perfect solution will do so (recall the girl and the arithmetic problem)(Weil 2015, 108). According to Weil, not paying attention leads to rushed decisions which in turn lead to faulty outcomes (Weil 2007, 388). That, however, might sound like an obvious point. Who would deny that rushed decision-making is at a higher risk of producing non-optimal outcomes than a decision-making process that has not been rushed? No one would deny this. Yet, the objection misses the point and thereby illustrates Weil's point rather nicely: Weil is not making the obvious point objected to above, but the more radical<sup>89</sup> point that whenever we try to find solutions by beginning to look for solutions rather than to look at the problem<sup>90</sup> in need of a solution, we misconceive the problem and therefore end up offering misguided solutions. If we start by looking at what we can do, as Sartre instructs (Sartre 1946, 33), then we start by bringing 'the mark of our personality into the problem' and thus we start by aiming at failure. Contra Sartre, Weil's work instructs us to put ourselves as problem-solvers out of focus and the very problem back into focus<sup>91</sup>(GG 49). Finally, I suggest that we prefer Weil's instruction to Sartre's because not only does following Weil's instruction shift the problem back into focus<sup>92</sup>, but it guarantees us that if we follow it then a solution will offer itself to us (Murdoch 1970, 36), (WFG 106), (GG 48). Since if we pay attention, then we can gain a full understanding of a problem and its needs, and when we have such an understanding, we cannot help but try to satisfy these needs<sup>93</sup>. For Weil, if one pays "the fullest possible attention" to a problem, seeing the problem in full, then 'one sees the problem which one has obligations to' (WFG 73-4). In short, where x is 'needs' action follows from attention, because attention to x leads to the acknowledgement of x which entails obedience to satisfy x.

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<sup>89</sup> In the original sense of radix.

<sup>90</sup> Whether it be ethical or arithmetical.

<sup>91</sup> Not to mention how Weil would object to the objection's squeaking 'low-cost-high-profit' ring.

<sup>92</sup> Or least keeping it there.

<sup>93</sup> This is connected to Weil's theology and her understanding of the concepts of 'affliction', 'obedience', and 'necessity' (GG 43-51, 80-85)

- 2.3. Nevertheless, the Sartrean might press on, attention as instruction remains unclear. How do you do it? How do you ‘open yourself’? Weil is far from presenting a clear method. Granted that she offers the method of grace and adds that “[g]race alone can do it” (GG 10). Yet, ‘be graceful’ is still unclear and uninformative. What does it mean?
- 2.4. To understand what it means I refer to Weillienne metaphysics and psychology in which grace and gravity are the primary principles and each other’s opposite (GG 1). Crudely put, gravity pulls you down towards your baser instincts e.g., selfishness whereas grace pulls you up towards the more graceful, ideal, and ethically preferable e.g., self-effacement. Grace, however, is not the method by which you practice or achieve attention. On the contrary, “attention properly directed lifts you up” (Snively 2017, 112), that is, attention is the method or practice through which you can receive grace. Being graceful means practising self-effacement and using attention to shift yourself out of focus and the problem back into focus. Being graceful means not letting oneself be pulled down by gravity to one’s baser instincts. Yet, this hardly satisfies the Sartrean demand for clarity. To satisfy it, I think Weil would agree to the following: imagine a soldier who has not eaten for three days and finally comes in possession of a loaf of bread. Just as she is about to set her teeth into it, she sees a child and instantly recognizes the wild look in her eyes: the child has starved as well. Here the soldier could be pulled by gravity towards egoism: she could devour the bread herself or she could, as she should, pay attention to the child’s eyes’ wild look, be graceful<sup>94</sup> and share the bread with her, even though eating all of it herself would provide her with more satisfaction. In this case, ‘be graceful’ means sharing the bread.
- 2.5. Say the Sartrean agreed to this level of clarity. He might still complain that Weil’s instruction is unattractive, not because it is unclear, but because it is inauspicious. If we follow Weil’s instruction and pay attention, which is done only at great pains, as is clear from the example with the soldier, Weil admits that despite these pains we cannot be sure to receive grace because “[i]t is not in our power to travel in a vertical direction” (WFG 36). Why, then, go through these

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<sup>94</sup> And in this order precisely. She first pays attention, then she is graceful. <sup>95</sup> Indeed, they are given to the agent not taken or invented the agent.

pains, which Weil makes sure to stress are many and severe, if the promise of success is not even made?

2.6. To which Weil would reply that if we “look heavenward for a long time, God comes and takes us up” (WFG 36). That is, just as the solution to the problem will offer itself if we patiently pay attention, so too grace will be given. Weil should grant the Sartrean that solutions, as well as grace, are given in a different manner<sup>19</sup> and perhaps later than the Sartrean would prefer. Yet, I suggest that the Sartrean should still prefer Weil’s instruction to Sartre’s, that is, he should go through the pains and put himself in a position where he can receive grace because the alternative to it (to be pulled down by gravity and use force or, what Murdoch calls Sartre’s “giddy empty will” (Murdoch 1970, 35)) is worse: he would become a thing rather than a human being: since force per Weillienne definition “is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing” (Weil 2007, 378).

2.7. Thus, I reject the Sartrean concerns that attention as instruction is unclear and inauspicious to an extent that should make it unpreferable to the philosopher or indeed invaluable to philosophy. I now turn to consider the concern of whether philosophy can even be done from contemplation or this “suspended, patient openness” that Weil instructs us to aim for.

### **3. A Practical Concern**

3.1. In part, practising attention is avoiding the use of intellect and language, since “the intellect and its expression in language [...] obscures our relationship to truth” (Thomas 2020, 152), (WFG 72). However, the somewhat obvious objection could run, how does one do philosophy without the use of intellect and language? Arguably, intellect and language are substantial parts of doing philosophy, i.e., arguing points, building up dialectics, etc. Whilst philosophy might be present in different literary genres<sup>95</sup> it is still manifested in language. Indeed, in Weil’s view, this very essay is not philosophy given its dialectic form, language, and intellect<sup>21</sup> (Thomas 2020, 150).

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<sup>95</sup> Arguably in poetics. At the very least, essays may vary across institutions, publishing houses, etc. <sup>21</sup> If I may be so bold.

3.2. To which I would reply that first, it is indeed arguable that Weil would not think that this essay is philosophy (Snively 2017, 114). Yet, to concede that “[an essay] is about philosophy, but it is not philosophy” does not exhaust Weil’s point (Snively 2017, 114). Instead, I suggest that Weil is making a more delicate point than the one objected to (i.e., that philosophy either takes place with or without language and intellect). Weil is not arguing that there is no room for intellect and language in our pursuit of truth. Rather, she is arguing that we should listen before we speak, receive truth rather than construct it and in doing so obstruct it (Weil 2015, 108). The first point is that if we listen before we speak, we might receive information otherwise unavailable to us. This rather obscure point becomes clearer when Handke writes that it is when we listen before speaking that we might experience that “the world narrates itself [...] absolutely without words, to [us]” (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 177). In other words, refraining from expressing ourselves in the language in which we usually express ourselves makes us receptive to information mediated in other languages. The second point, that we should receive truth rather than construct, it might not suit the secular reader too well. If so, I suggest that he takes Weil to say the following: the answer is already there. You do not have to intervene with your intellect to make up an answer. Rather, you should pay closer attention to your problem. Understanding it fully entails understanding what it needs and when you understand what it needs, you have received your solution from the problem rather than from yourself. On the final point of the intellect, however, Weil does bite a bit into the bullet. Weil is critical of the tasks that we assign to the intellect<sup>96</sup>, yet she is not arguing that we should sign off intellect – only that we reassign it. “The intelligence has nothing to discover, it has only to clear the ground” (GG 13). The intellect should serve the practice of attention, its efforts should be negative, and we should prefer this reassignment since it is attentive reception that makes wisdom available to us (Thomas 2020, 152) for it is “the groundwork of our decision-making” (Murdoch 1970, 36).

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<sup>96</sup> Intervening rather than receiving



## Conclusion

I have thus argued that we can extract some philosophical value from Weil's work on attention and that this philosophical value is a preserving and instructive kind, in short, a practical kind. It is instructive because it tells us which mental practice (attention) is furthering for contemplation<sup>97</sup> and which is not (force) and how to obtain and avoid each. It is preserving because having such work available to us provides us with a language for talking about contemplation, where it prospers and where it withers, and methods for ensuring its prosperity and avoiding its withering. Finally, I suggest that since much philosophical enquiry today takes place in "neo-liberal temporal regimes<sup>24</sup>" (Rozelle-Stone 2017, 169) where contemplation is at a particularly high risk of withering, why Weil's work on attention is of an increased philosophical value.

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<sup>97</sup> This "suspended, patient openness" in which the proper solutions are received. <sup>24</sup>For instance, London universities.

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