



Attention in Simone Weil (1909–1943)

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Attention is for Weil the good and proper way of relating to reality, but it is also something extremely rare, almost miraculous, which goes against humanity's natural tendency toward 'gravity'.

Through gravity, we give in to the attraction of force, power, greed, falsehood, and, most importantly, the illusion that we are at the centre of the universe, morally and metaphysically, and that we have power over others and over the nature of reality.

By paying attention, by contrast, we remove ourselves from the centre, giving ourselves entirely to what is outside. Our self thus shrinks to the point of invisibility. This means not only assenting to reality, but also desiring reality as it is, with a desire that is paradoxical because it wants nothing but what is, and nothing at all for oneself.

Weil calls our involvement in attention an act of *decreation* (*décreation*), and means it quite literally. In paying attention and discarding the self we are mirroring God's act of creation, whereby God (who is fullness of being) withdrew in order to allow something else to exist. We are the product of such withdrawal, which is an act of love, and our task is to replicate it by withdrawing ourselves, giving up all personal will. The will is the only thing that can, albeit in illusory manner, oppose reality. In fact, for Weil, everything obeys laws of necessity, and our only real choice is to conform to it, and desire it, through attention. For these reasons, Weil claims, attention is the same thing as prayer: to lift the veil that separates us from truth, even if the veil is ourselves.

Ethically, attention is not only the right way to approach reality, but also enables us to act rightly, because full attention tells us not only what is there but what we must do. This is part of what Weil calls obedience.

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Keywords:

Attention, gravity, decreation, prayer, love, God, obedience, desire.