

# The Concept of Attention in Simone Weil: The Pure Eyes for Nothing

---

**HANAKO IKEDA**

Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University

*In this research, I would like to explore the experience of undergoing the limits by reading Simone Weil's thought about 'attention' and Paul Standish's book *Beyond the Self*. First, the concept of 'attention' that I think best describes Weil's thoughts will be discussed. Second, on the basis of Weil's 'attention', I will return to the argument about the distinction between limits and limitations in *Beyond the Self*. This may finally reveal the attitude of waiting that Weil presents as the consent to be nothing, which is made possible by directing our attention to the limits. This attitude can also be deeply concerned with the virtue of humility and the concept of receptiveness in *Beyond the Self*.*

## I. TWO ANGLES ON THE CONCEPT OF 'ATTENTION' IN SIMONE WEIL

### *As the Eyes toward the Limit Situation*

In the first angle, the concept of 'attention' is the attitude toward a limit situation. Karl Jaspers' usage of *Grenzsituation* (limit situation) is particularly practical in light of Weil's thought. Weil often invokes the metaphor of Plato's Cave in *The Republic* to describe such a limit situation. It is usually considered that a limit separates the inside and outside of the Cave. The limit here is rigid: consequently, it seems impossible for us to go beyond it. Weil says that the experience of such a limit is an encounter with the impossible. In other words, the limit situation here is equal to the experience of the impossibility.

As examples of limit situations, Weil offers contemplation of beauty, torture without compensation, religion without faith in immortality, and so on. Initially, we might find no connection between these examples and the limit in the metaphor of the Cave. However, the beauty here, for example, exceeds our prospects. For that reason, we are often caught off guard by it. Everything would seem unlike the time before we encounter such beauty. That is just parallel to the contrast between consciousness and intellect of inside and outside the Cave. The distinction between gloom and brightness in the metaphor of the Cave reflects the distinction between the attitude toward contemplation of beauty and our ordinary vision.

Put another way, the limit implies the discontinuity which induces us to feel the impossibility of going beyond the limit. According to Weil, it presents a contradiction that confuses us, but it can be the important experience which opens up another possibility of a limit situation to us. Weil holds that it compels us to tear ourselves from

our ordinary vision: our usual consciousness and understandings.

In order to realize this, we must wait on and tolerate the limit situation. According to Weil, what is necessary for us is neither a future-oriented attitude nor a past-oriented one. Recognizing such a limit means being receptive to the past as it was without expecting any compensation (Weil, 1979). We must abide by the present: the limits in front of us. This is exactly what is implied in the concept of 'attention'. Consequently, 'attention' includes not only the attitude of waiting for but also that of tolerating misery and agony. To put it another way, 'attention' comprises both senses of wish and misery. The attitude of waiting on shows a persistent wish and a tolerance of misery.

In this respect, Weil argues that the person who first notices and talks to an anonymous miserable person by the roadside has the eyes of 'attention' (Weil, 1966). He can notice that person in the eyes of 'attention', because he shares the sense of misery with him: and nevertheless remains close to him without losing a wish. That is to say, 'attention' is not the ability of defending ourselves against enemies, but the experience of exposing ourselves to the other whom we cannot recognize easily. The eyes of 'attention' are directed to the limits that shake the fixed and standing routine.

### *As the Experience of 'Relation'*

This characteristic of 'attention' is deeply involved with the following second angle. As described above, the experience of a limit situation means an encounter with impossibility. The point here is that it is also the experience of '*rapport*' (relation). The contradiction described above might seem incompatible with the concept of relation, for the contradiction is convertible into the collapse of relations. Nevertheless, Weil finds harmony and balance in the contradiction, which she describes using metaphor of '*pont*' (bridge).

Weil describes such a relation as a 'bridge' with which we can tolerate the impossibility, or nothing. It is built over the limits and enables us to relate with something more than existence, i.e. nothing. Weil makes a clear distinction between 'existence' and 'reality'. Here, the impossibility or nothing falls into the 'reality'. It is similar to the distinction between consciousness and intellect of inside and outside the Cave: thus, the 'bridge' is extremely exceptional.

Weil finds such a 'bridge' in ancient Greek civilization, for instance. She regards ancient Greeks as special recipients of a revelation about infinite distance separating 'existence' and 'reality'. The distance here shows the impossibility, or the contradiction described above. Weil directs her attention to it and tolerates the uneasiness and exhaustion that the 'attention' entails. Most important here is that the contradiction or limit situation itself also enables us to wait on persistently until the response of someone arrives. In other words, she finds here 'relation' as a story, which makes the impossible possible.

Rather than revealing a vision of a transcendent world, the intention for this discussion is to present the possibility of experience of the impossible itself. That is to say, the point is not after crossing the 'bridge', but just the midst of the 'bridge'. In Weil's thought, experiencing the impossible is regarded as equivalent to seeing through the relation. It represents the attitude of abiding by the limit itself rather than getting beyond it immediately. Of course, it does not mean affirming the limit itself without reserve. It means experiencing the limit thoroughly.

As I have noted, it is a 'bridge' that enables us to go beyond the limit. More accurately, the 'bridge' is the action of mediation itself. We would feel uneasy when

we encounter the other whom we cannot recognize easily. We would probably feel like tearing our attention from such a person. To put it in an extreme, we might pass him without notice. What is most difficult for us is not extending hospitality to that person, but merely noticing and realizing him. This realization is presupposed by the hospitality, which Weil's 'attention' reveals. We have already talked to the man whom I described above when we find the 'relation' in a limit situation. In this sense, we attend not as observers but as agents.

The preceding discussion is related to the reading of the limits. The discussion in the next section returns to the argument about the distinction between limits and limitations in *Beyond the Self*.

## II. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LIMITS AND LIMITATIONS IN BEYOND THE SELF

Both the limits and limitations discussed in *Beyond the Self* cannot be considered without language. Although they cannot be regarded identically as the limit or limit situation described above in the light of Weil's thought, the experience of the limits of language is certain to be included in her thought. It is often described as an exercise of intellect in the limit situation.

Reviewing the argument about this point in *Beyond the Self*. In the chapter six in this book, for example, 'positivism, scientism, the prevailing idea of the human subject, and the preoccupation with the ideal of autonomy' are assessed as 'the interrelation of four mistaken views' (Standish, 1992, p. 222). These limitations are described as what prevent us from going beyond. On the other hand, the limits of language are described as being able to have a positive sense. It is this point that I think is worth careful review here.

Whether these limits are also something we must confront and overcome, as in the case of limitations, or something that we should abide by, is the theme of this discussion. The attitude toward the limit situation in Weil shows the positive sense in abiding by the existent limits. Added to this, it is apparently very difficult to separate the limits clearly from the limitations. This difficulty is related to the two opposing ways of thinking: the 'rational-assertive' and the 'receptive-responsive' used in that book (p.19).

In closing this presentation, another interpretation of this framework is described in the next section. It is related to revelation of the attitude of 'waiting' that Weil presents along with the concept of 'attention'.

## III. BEYOND DUALISM: REMAINING IN RELATION WITH 'ATTENTION'

As discussed earlier, it is difficult to separate the limits from the limitations clearly. That assessment can also apply to the distinction between the 'rational-assertive' and the 'receptive-responsive'. This framework might be effective to reveal problems in present-day life, but it is also the fact that there is something obscured by it. The same can be said the distinction between the self-regarding and the other-regarding ways of thinking, which is often heard today, especially in the study of ethics.

The self-regarding thought perhaps can be considered as the target of criticism in *Beyond the Self*. Needless to say, Weil condemns this kind of egocentricity, too. However, the other-regarding thought does not necessarily connect with the attitude

found in the concept of 'attention' or the virtue of humility. To abide by the existing limits is regarded as neither self-regarding nor other-regarding. It is intermediate between these two. Although definitely different from benefitting the self, it also differs from benefitting the other directly. Weil abides there because she wants to do so purely for herself; otherwise, she is regarded as excessively passive. Although this view certainly includes the danger of getting into the faith in autonomy in a negative sense, it remains worthy of consideration. The pureness of 'attention' is sustained with the awareness of limits pertaining to the self and with the will to fulfill the duty to the self. Georges Bataille (1897-1962) once describes Weil's thoughts and her life as the will devoted to 'inanité' (inanity) (Bataille, 1971). Perhaps the phrase of 'inanité' here represents Bataille's contradictory feelings for her as a certain irony. However, it would be lapidary in so far as it does not mean incurable pessimism. Weil's devotion to inanity, which Bataille describes, shows the abandonment of the idea of perspective. In other words, Weil intends to annihilate the self as a centre of individual perspectives, which dominate the modern world. Such kind of self would assert itself beyond all limits and try to control and possess everything. It is exactly the same image as the autonomy criticized in *Beyond the Self*.

To the contrary, the self, to which Weil attempts to fulfil her duty, is not the personal but the impersonal. She ventures to render up the personal to the impersonal. Her criticism against the personalism reflects this venture. Weil holds that humility is abhorrent to the nature of human beings. It is the only 'supernatural virtue', i.e. consent to accept inanity and nothing. It is made possible by directing our 'attention' to the limits: thus, it is not merely being solely passive, but abiding one's position persistently with a tenacious wish. In other words, it is 'nothing' that calls us to commit ourselves to the other. This attitude can also be deeply related with the virtue of humility and the concept of receptiveness in *Beyond the Self*.

## REFERENCE

- Bataille, G. (1971) *Kotoba to Eros (Language and Eros)* translated by Isao Yamamoto and Kenzo Furuya (Tokyo: Futami-syobo).
- Standish, P. (1992) *Beyond the Self: Wittgenstein, Heidegger and the Limits of Language* (Avebury Series in Philosophy) (Avebury).
- Weil, S. (1950) *La connaissance surnaturelle* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Weil, S. (1951) *Intuitions pre-chretiennes* (La Colombe).
- Weil, S. (1953) *La source grecque* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Weil, S. (1966) *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard).
- Weil, S. (1979) *Le pesantier et la grace* (Paris: Plon).