

The Concept of Attention in Simone Weil: Toward its Ordinariness and Creativity

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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 out 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.

PREFACE

This study explores the concept of 'attention' in Simone Weil's works through a dialogue with Paul Standish's book *Beyond the Self*.

On Weil, people often say that there are two Simone Weils. This description points out that there is a crucial divergence between Weil's early works, when she is vigorously involved in the activity of trade unions and does not hesitate to profess herself as an atheist, and Weil's later works, when she leans toward the various mystical ideas and love of (and for) God. It may be shocking for us to see this change from Weil the atheist to Weil the mystic. Then, we are probably led to one question as follows: What is the turning point in her life?

This question, however, would prevent us from differentiating the apparent division between the two Simone Weils from her core issue. In other words, it is possible that to make assumptions about the two Simone Weils means failing to grasp the point of Weil's coherent issue which she approaches by staking her life on it.

What she is claimed to be attracted to throughout her life is the claim of '*pourquoi* (why/for what)', which, for Weil, means the claim of nameless and miserable people whom no one can recognize in their ordinary daily lives. It never releases her interest. Therefore, many researchers recognize that the problem of '*malheur* (misfortune, misery)' is a most important issue in Weil. They think of '*malheur*' as a key concept in understanding of Weil and often try to find a coherent basis common in both early Weil and later Weil's works.

In this paper, I basically agree with such style of study that I explain above, but it is not my

position to directly dissolve the apparent severance in the two Simone Weils. My thesis is to explore the core issue of Weil in relation to the claim of *'pourquoi'* and the concept of *'attention'*. Both of these have to do with the concept of *'malheur'*. The former is the expression of it and the latter is the eyes of those who care about it.

In particular, *'attention'* is thought to be a unique style of thought that penetrates the whole of Weil's thoughts. It is the eyes that can see what (and who) cannot be seen. In this sense, it has to do with the concept of ordinariness and creativeness. It is on these two concepts that I would like to establish the basis of my paper.

'Attention' is unusual because it can see 'what does not exist' (i.e. what cannot be seen in our ordinary daily life). In this sense, *'malheur'* is representative of 'what does not exist'. It brings us the experience to touch the extraordinariness. However, it is not extraordinary because it is far apart from our ordinary daily lives; on the contrary, experience of *'malheur'* is what enriches our ordinariness from inside. Metaphorically speaking, the extraordinariness is the seed planted in the ordinariness. I will discuss about this relation in the last section of this paper.

First, I will start to discuss the concept of *'attention'* that I think describes Weil's thoughts directly. Weil says that the first person, who notices and talks to a nameless miserable man or woman on the roadside, has the eyes of attention. In other words, attention is not the ability of defending ourselves against enemies, but rather exposing ourselves to the other whom we cannot recognize easily. To put it another way, the eyes of attention are directed to the limits that separate us from what we cannot see. To describe this, Weil often quotes the metaphor of the Cave from Plato. As we have seen, we can interpret that there is the limit between inside and outside the Cave. The limit is rigid and it feels impossible for us to go beyond it. Weil says that to experience such limits is the experience of the impossibility. However, at the same time, it is also the experience of the relations as the bridge that enables us to endure the impossibility, or nothing. In addition to this, the limits, which show us the impossibility and nothing, are incompatible with the concept of the power and the utility. Such limits should not be made good use of something, especially of educational system.

Second, regarding this point, I will return to the argument about the distinction between limits and limitations in *Beyond the Self*. Later in this paper, I will discuss how we consider about the limitations that prevent us from going beyond. I wonder whether they should be regarded as something we should confront and overcome, or something we should abide by partly. Because my point is not revealing the vision of another world going beyond but showing the possibility of the experience of impossibility itself, I will examine how this point is discussed in *Beyond the Self*.

That discussion may reveal the attitude of waiting that Weil presents as the consent to be nothing, which is achieved by directing our attention to the limits. This attitude is also deeply concerned with the virtue of humility and the concept of the receptiveness in *Beyond the Self*. This argument will lead us to reveal the meaning of reconsidering the possibility of education, which has to do with the concept of the ordinariness and creativeness.

I. TWO VIEWS OF THE CONCEPT OF 'ATTENTION' IN SIMONE WEIL

In this section, I will discuss the concept of 'attention' as an introduction to this paper by following two views.

- (1) As the eyes toward the 'limit situation'
- (2) As the experience of 'relation'

As the Eyes Toward the Limit Situation

In the first view, 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 says 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. It is to acknowledge '*malheur*',

although almost everyone cannot keep acknowledging in encountering with it. That is to say, 'attention' is not the ability of defending ourselves against enemies, but rather the experience of exposing ourselves to the other, who we cannot recognize easily. The eyes of 'attention' are directed to the limits that challenge the fixed and standing routine.

As the Experience of 'Relation'

This characteristic of 'attention' is deeply involved with the second view as well. As described previously, 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 can be converted into the collapse of relations. Nevertheless, Weil finds harmony and balance in the contradiction, which she describes by using the metaphor of '*pont*' (bridge).

Weil describes such a relation as a 'bridge' on 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 particularly exceptional.

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

Rather than revealing a vision of a transcendent world, the intention for this research 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 noted, it is a 'bridge' that enables us to go beyond the limit. More accurately, the 'bridge' represents the operation of mediation itself. We would feel uncomfortable to encounter the other, who we cannot recognize easily. We would probably feel like removing our attention from such a person. To put it in an extreme, we might pass him or her without notice. What is most difficult for us is not extending hospitality to that person, but merely noticing and acknowledging him or her. This acknowledgement is presupposed by hospitality, which Weil's 'attention' reveals. We have already talked to the man described previously when we find the 'relation' in a limit situation. In this sense, we are not observers but agents.

The preceding argument 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 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 believe is worth careful review.

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 of abiding by the existing 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' (p. 19).

Another interpretation of this framework is discussed 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 mentioned 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 for revealing problems in present-day life, but it is also the fact that there is something obscured by it. The same can be said of the distinction between the self-regarding and the other-regarding ways of thinking, which is often discussed 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 of these two. Although definitely different from benefitting the self, to abide by the existing limits also differs from benefitting the other directly. Weil abides there because she wants to do so purely for herself; otherwise, she is regarded as much too 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)¹. Perhaps the phrase of ‘*inanité*’ here represents Bataille’s contradictory feelings for Weil 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 personalism reflects this. 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 the nothing). It is made possible by directing our ‘attention’ to the limits: thus, it is not solely passive, but abides by one’s position persistently and tenaciously. In other words, it is ‘nothing’ that calls us to commit ourselves to the other. This attitude can also be deeply related to the virtue of humility and the concept of receptiveness in *Beyond the Self*.

IV. TOWARD THE DISCUSSION ABOUT ORDINARINESS AND CREATIVITY OF ‘ATTENTION’

In closing, I present certain perspective to consider about the ordinariness and creativity of ‘attention’. It also has to do with considering the relation between the concepts of extraordinariness and ordinariness.

As mentioned in the last section, ‘attention’ is not and should not be an ability that only special people, such as saints, licensed for. ‘Attention’ occurs in extremely ordinary situations that we cannot acknowledge without experiencing it, whereas it is an extraordinary ability because it can see what cannot be seen inherently. Only when the extraordinariness of ‘attention’ is ordinary, can we acknowledge the experience that ‘attention’ brings.

This relation between the concept of extraordinariness and ordinariness represents the creativity of ‘attention’. Its creativity does not depend upon the function that makes something from nothing, but upon the process that returns to the self after undergoing collapse of self-evidence. It does not show either self-regarding moral or other-regarding moral.

‘Attention’ makes us the stranger. ‘*Je*’ (I) is, so to speak, the most unfamiliar for each of us as an individual. Wondering about this kind of ‘*je*’ or the self never leads us to egocentrism, but to the other, which is the source of creativity for us.

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