

Simone Weil: The Price of Paying Attention

Article by Julia Bell

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Our attention is constantly being usurped by the cultural and technological distractions that surround us. The words of Simone Weil illuminate how developing attention is the key not only to pursuing political objectives, but also to fully grasping the humanity and plight of those in whose name the struggle for social justice is fought.

This article is part of the series "Schools for Thought" – a collection of reflections on the contributions of four thinkers to our understanding of education today and its potential: Maria Montessori, Pierre Bourdieu, Simone Weil, and Benedict Anderson.

Simone Weil (1909-1943), whose life was tragically cut short by illness brought about in part by her almost religious sense of political conviction, cuts an interesting figure in 20th-century philosophy. She stood for a fully committed connection between the personal and the political, which she embodied in her own life. Determined that she should be treated no better than her fellow factory workers, she deliberately impoverished herself, committing to a way of life so austere it would eventually kill her. When she died in 1943 in a sanatorium in England, in flight from occupied France, she was only 33. Wracked by tuberculosis but also refusing to eat, she suffered a massive heart attack. In the vein of the medieval mystics, her physical denial seemed to bring her closer to moments of revelation. Like all the best visionaries, she left behind fragments that still resonate strongly today, notably in her work on attention. These insights now speak loudly to us and to our peculiar technological and educational reality.

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a place of conscious receptiveness.*

For Weil, "attention consists of suspending thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired."^[1] Key to understanding her is the principle that attention is embedded in the physical body and is often blocked by pride or judgment or predetermination or competitiveness; by thinking too much, putting the self in the way. Attention is not a passive, meditative state from which all feelings should be removed but a place of conscious receptiveness where it is possible to see things as they really are. Attention is really looking at the world. Not just in a superficial way, but with openness and curiosity from inside an embodied consciousness. It is this state of mind, she argues, that produces revelations, insights, moments of clarity, and is the "object of all studies", because it is the place where moral

reasoning becomes possible, allowing us to see “that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do – that is enough. The rest follows.”

The connection she makes between attention, thinking, and acting seems suddenly crucial to our current predicament with technology. Anyone who owns a smartphone is now being preyed upon at the level of their thoughts to turn a profit for Silicon Valley. Our attention has been monetised. Our classrooms are digitalised, and knowledge has become “bite-sized”, with teaching reduced to multiple-choice quizzes and games. It’s important to consider how the very way we interact with technology is a “biohack”: our bodies are conduits for electricity, and it is this capacity that is utilised by the haptics of a smartphone screen. “Hearts” and “likes” have a physical, emotional, and reactive effect on us. They elicit affect – feeling – but they also stop us from thinking. We become like pinballs in the machine of push notifications designed to distract us. In such an environment, what does it even mean to pay attention?

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Weil defined freedom as a relationship between thought and action. If you are able to think for yourself and then act on those thoughts, then you are free, but in our new techno-reality, if our thoughts are hijacked before they’ve even been had, how can we know how to act? And therefore, how are we free?

It was when she was teaching at Lycée Le Puy that Weil began to think about attention. The classes she taught on the history of science were basic, the students taught by rote. They were not encouraged to ask questions or to think for themselves. She got into trouble with the school authorities for taking the students on a trip to the mines to see how coal was extracted and for going off-piste from the syllabus. It was her students who protected her and in some cases failed their exams because she had not taught the curriculum.

Education at its best is the most utopian of endeavours, the gift a society passes on to the next generation. For Weil, learning is the “gymnastics of the attention”. In the paradigm shift brought about by technology, it seems more necessary than ever to equip students with the capacity to navigate this realm. To pay attention to their attention, to consider it as something precious, something useful, something worth educating.

For society to find renewal, it needs creative thinkers; people who can come up with lateral solutions to the very pressing issues we collectively face. But if their attention is being hacked out from beneath them by Big Tech, how can we encourage thought that will sit still long enough to make those kinds of connections? At a time when we are being challenged as never before on what freedom really means to us, we could do a lot worse than starting with our fractured attention spans.

[1] Simone Weil (1951). *Waiting on God*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.



Julia Bell is a writer and reader in Creative Writing at Birkbeck, University of London. She is the author of *Radical Attention* (2020, Peninsula Press), an essay on the battle for our attention in the age of distraction. She has also published three novels, poetry, lyric essays, and short stories.

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