Politics Beyond the Self: on (in)attention and the (dis)integration of the common world

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Abstract

The thesis argues that late modern societies face a structural crisis of attention with political consequences. Drawing on Byung-Chul Han, read alongside Michel Foucault, the thesis argues that neoliberal governance reorganizes attention around performance and self-monitoring, this way undermining the conditions of outward-directed attention on which political judgment depends. Against this backdrop, the thesis turns to Simone Weil to ask whether an alternative understanding of attention can resist this. It reconstructs Weil's definition of attention as disciplined receptivity through which reality and others can appear without being reduced to projections. The thesis also addresses the objection that inward attentional practices amount to privatized coping, arguing that Weil's analysis of affliction shows that her conception of attention is genuinely outward directed. Finally, the work shows that Weil's mystical understanding of attention remains continuous with her earlier political diagnosis and requires cultivation through the institution of education. The thesis concludes that political renewal in the context of late modernity is difficult, because contemporary forms of governance actively undermine human's capacity for attention.

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest" (Leviticus 23:22, NRSV)

Introduction

Certain features of late modern social life place strain on the forms of sustained and shared attention that are required for persons to regard one another as participants in common political and social practices. They include digital acceleration, increasing individualization, and performance-oriented norms, and they shape how attention is formed and exercised (Han 2015). Modern individuals are increasingly oriented toward a form of self-referential validation and competitive visibility, and in doing so their capacity to attend to one another as moral and political subjects weaken (Han 2018). This thesis argues that the failure of individuals to cultivate receptive and non-instrumental modes of attention toward others, together with the failure of modern institutional arrangements to encourage them to do so, has contributed to a modern political crisis. Against this, the guiding question of the project is whether Simone Weil's (1951; 2002; 2002b; 1934/2005; 2005) account of attention, understood as a disciplined posture of receptivity toward reality and others, can offer a solution to the crisis as a precondition for political judgement, social responsibility, and just collective life.

The analysis that follows approaches the crisis of attention as an effect of certain transformations that have occurred in the organization of governance. To this end, this thesis draws on Byung-Chul Han's diagnosis of neoliberal psychopolitics, read in continuity with Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power, to analyze such contemporary techniques (Han 2015; Han 2017; Foucault 1977). Han's account of neoliberal psychopolitics, complemented by related critical accounts, thus provides the primary diagnostic context within which the thesis turns to Simone Weil's conception of attention. Han extends Foucauldian analysis by showing how, under neoliberal conditions, discipline increasingly operates through an ideology of freedom (Han 2015). While Foucault showed that modern power does not primarily operate through visible coercion or prohibition (Foucault 1977), Han's account examines a later phase of this development, in which these disciplinary mechanisms are further internalized and reorganized.

A prominent implication of Han's analysis is that the cumulative effect of these phenomena is the degradation of attention. Under these neoliberal conditions, subjects are encouraged to govern themselves autonomously, but this autonomy is exercised in ways that

conform to demands of productivity, performance, and optimization (ibid: 1-6; 8-11). Freedom and compulsion thus in reality become one, as individuals are driven to monitor, perfect, and exploit themselves in the name of self-realization, often to the point of exhaustion (ibid). The presence of others is less readily encountered as a reason to pause and turn outwards, but as a limitation on performance (ibid: 21-25; Han 2018: 1-8).

In addition, Han articulates that contemporary communication environments are characterized by *hyperconnectivity*, which he understands as the constant availability of communication channels and the continuous circulation of messages across digital platforms (Han 2017: 9-15). Communication increasingly takes the form of immediate reactions by drawing attention toward speed, novelty, and emotional intensity and diminishing the time and distance required for understanding (ibid: 15-18; 59-63). This mode of hypercommunication produces what Han describes as a *swarm* rather than a public, composed of individuals who are continuously connected but lack a shared orientation or common point of reference (ibid: 9-15).

The thesis turns to Simone Weil's conception of attention to examine whether an alternative understanding of attention can be articulated that resists capture by self-optimization and self-regulation, while still sustaining orientation toward others and the common world. It is necessary to clarify that Weil's account of attention diverges sharply from the default modern understanding of attention. Developed by John Locke, a paradigmatic modern conception of attention is understood as a voluntary act of the mind, through which the subject actively selects, orders, and controls her ideas (Locke: 1690/1999). In this Lockean understanding, attention is closely associated with mental effort and the exercise of the will.

For Simone Weil, attention is neither a temporary exercise of intensified focus nor an act of mental control (Weil 1951: 109-110). Her conception describes a stable posture of receptivity through which the subject suspends the impulse to select, judge, or appropriate, allowing reality to be received for what it is (ibid: 111-112). Therefore, Weil describes attention as the "greatest of all efforts", but a "negative" one (ibid: 111): an effort to not interfere and not to impose meaning (ibid: 111-112). Looking this way at attention, it is the state the precedes deliberate thought and is in fact the condition for genuine understanding.

This understanding of attention leads Weil beyond a purely psychological account and into a metaphysical register. The "negative effort" requires the renunciation of the will's attempt to master reality, thereby allowing what is there to appear without being subject to

interpretation or subjective understanding. This, for Weil, is God – the transcendent source from which truth and meaning flow, encountered through the suspension of the self (ibid: 112-114; Weil 2002: 32-40). Attention cannot be directed towards God as such (Weil 1951:114); it can only be directed toward what is given, toward the world, toward others. In this way, attention could make it possible for aspects of reality irreducible to human will or projection to be disclosed (ibid: 112-114; Weil 2002a: 32-40).

However, this formulation of attention brings a difficulty into view insofar as it appears too radically individual to address the realities of social and political life. Weil's conception of attention is articulated through a mystical vocabulary, grounded in practices such as detachment from the will, inward discipline, and receptivity. But does mysticism also not involve a withdrawal from the shared public world, and does this not undermine its capacity to function as a political practice? If this is the case, Weil's mystical account of attention appears difficult to reconcile with the claim that attention can function as a requirement for a political life.

This concern finds a clear articulation in Hannah Arendt's critique of the *vita contemplativa.* Arendt understands contemplation and thinking as politically limited because they both require withdrawal from the shared world in which political life takes place. She describes thinking as an activity "non-appearing by definition" and that requires "a deliberate withdrawal from appearances" that due to its nature "tends to withdraw from the world altogether." (Arendt 1978a:75). In addition, this tension is present in contemporary debates on mindfulness and therapeutic forms of attention (e.g. Han 2015, 2017, 2018; Žižek 2014; Illouz 2008; Davies 2015).

Slavoj Žižek, Eva Illouz, and William Davies, to mention a few, all agree that contemporary "self-help," coping practices are shaped by systemic forces. Žižek (2014: 57-77), for instance, claimed that contemporary practices of mindfulness and meditation operate as ideological supplements, enabling individuals to endure the violence of capitalist structures while not changing them; Illouz (2008) argued that the therapeutic turn reframes collective crises as matters of personal emotion, thereby obscuring their systemic origins and privatizing suffering; Davies (2015) claimed that even the discourse of attention and mindfulness have been adopted into the machinery of neoliberal governance as instruments of productivity and control.

A tension between the mystical and the political is evident across different phases of Weil's intellectual work. In her writings of the 1930s, she directs her analysis toward concrete

political and social conditions, including industrial labor, bureaucratic domination, and prevailing forms of social organization. In her later writings, however, Weil's analysis proceeds withing a more explicitly metaphysical framework, organized around concepts such as attention, receptivity, and grace. This shift can easily be taken to indicate a withdrawal from political concerns. The question, however, is whether this interpretation is warranted. It remains possible that her later work does not abandon the political domain but instead seeks to clarify the individual capacities that must be in place if political judgment and responsibility are to be sustained at all.

The central claim advanced here is that Weil's notion of attention, though developed within a mystical metaphysics, is continuous with her earlier political ideas and retains a socio-political relevance even today. Even in her later writings, Weil continues to diagnose political and social pathologies, most explicitly in her concern with the destruction of human personality and in her analysis of uprootedness in modern societies (e.g. Weil 2002b; Weil 2005). More importantly, rather than drifting away from the political, she developed her notion of attention as a form of sustained concern with the conditions under which social and political life can become more intelligible, just, and humane. Furthermore, the thesis claims that Weil's conception of attention mediates between an inward ethical discipline and a precondition for socio-political life. To anticipate, it argues that Weil's conception of attention, though cultivated inwardly, is not private in essence; it is instead the hidden prerequisite for collective attention, social cohesion and political renewal, and its cultivation should become the central concern of institutions.

The thesis proceeds methodically by exploring, in Chapter I, the socio-political and institutional conditions under which attention is reshaped and depleted in late modern societies, drawing primarily on Byung-Chul Han's analysis (2015, 2017, 2018). Chapter II turns to Simone Weil's conception of attention, specifically in *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*, tracing its metaphysical and ethical dimensions as a response to the limitations of the dominant, self-centered models of attention diagnosed in Chapter I. Chapter III addresses the central tension in Weil's conception of attention by examining critiques that of inward attentional practices as insufficient for political engagement, drawing on Hannah Arendt, Slavoj Žižek (2014), Eva Illouz (2008), and William Davies (2015). Chapter IV advances the claim that Weil's notion of attention is neither private nor apolitical, offers a ground for reconciliation between Weil's earlier political and later mystical thought, and treats attention as a condition for reorienting individual existence toward a shared and just political existence.

Chapter I: A structural crisis of attention

The present chapter takes as its starting point the intuition that contemporary societies are experiencing not simply scattered instances of distraction, but a structural crisis of attention. The point is not that individuals occasionally fail to concentrate, but that the dominant forms of economic organization, communication, and emotional management systematically undermine the capacity for sustained perception, ethical relation, and shared meaning. The aim of the chapter is to reconstruct Byung-Chul Han's diagnosis of neoliberalism to show how attention itself is being reshaped under contemporary conditions. The task of this chapter is not only to assemble these insights into a unified line of argument, but to clarify the conditions under which attention is presently formed, exercised and depleted, against which Weil's account of attention will later be introduced as an alternative framework.

At the end of the chapter, the contours of the crisis of attention become clearer. Attention is not only a cognitive faculty but a socially structured practice. Under conditions of self-exploitation, exhaustion, hyper-communication, and individualization, attention is increasingly organized around the self – its productivity, its emotions, its resilience – rather than around a common world or the reality of others (Han 2015; Han 2017; Han 2018). For Han, neoliberal governance drives subjects toward the endless cycle of self-monitoring, optimization, and exposure – turning the direction of attention to the "I" (Han 2015: 8-11; 30-34). As a result, the absence of any attentional orientation directed outward – toward a shared reality, common world, a horizon of meaning – becomes a central source of alienation from political reality and from any wish to resist or transform it (Han 2017: 9-14; 67-69).

1.1. On Governance

Han's work offers a natural starting point of departure because it explicitly links the experiences of the contemporary subject to a transformation in the modalities of neoliberal power. Drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, Han argues that advanced capitalist societies have moved from a regime structured by prohibition, enclosure, and surveillance to a neoliberal order in which power operates primarily through an ideology of freedom (Foucault 1977; Han 2015: 8-11). In the disciplinary regime, obedience is enforced through institutions such as the factory, the prison, the school, or the barracks; subjects are shaped through external constraints that train the bodies to become productive and compliant (Foucault 1977: 135-169). By contrast, neoliberal power relaxes many of these external constraints and reorganizes domination at the level of the subject's

self-relation (Han 2015: 8-11). The subject is now governed by an imperative to perform, optimize, and continually enhance oneself (ibid). Han diagnoses late modernity as a regime of self-exploitation, and its characteristic subject as the achievement subject (Han 2015: 8-11; 30-34).

Han's diagnosis should be red in continuity with Foucault's account of disciplinary power, which itself is a historical departure from sovereign power. Under sovereign rule, power is exercised primarily through law, command, and the episodic use of force, most characteristically in the form of the right to take life or let live. Disciplinary power, by contrast, operates continuously through techniques of surveillance, normalization, and regulation, and is institutionalized (Foucault 1977). Byung-Chul Han extends this analysis by arguing that neoliberalism produces a mutation in which disciplinary power does not anymore rely on external pressures but reemerges in a new form, whereby the subjects come to govern *themselves* in accordance with neoliberal norms or ideas they experience as self-chosen (Han 2015: 8-11). In Han's formulation, auto-exploitation is more effective than heteronomous exploitation precisely because it is accompanied by the illusion of autonomy (Han 2015: 11).

1.2. On Productive Attention

Han explains how the neoliberal freedom granted to subjects to self-regulate can only sustain itself as a regime if the autonomy granted to individuals becomes an instrument of productivity and optimization (Han 2015: 8-11). This implies that the individual is compelled to monitor, perfect and exploit herself in the name of autonomy until exhaustion (ibid: 30-34). He develops his account of the *achievement society* (ibid: 8-11), where the *achievement subject* is best understood in terms of the subject's relation to herself and others. In the neoliberal achievement society, the imperative to be "oneself" is saturated with expectations of productivity, visibility, and optimization (ibid: 8-11; Han 2017: 9-19). In the achievement society, productivity is no longer understood as merely an external measurable output but becomes a general demand to render ones capacitates valuable (Han 2015: 8-11). Visibility functions as the social medium through which this productivity is affirmed and evaluated (Han 2017: 11-16). And finally, optimization names the ongoing requirement to treat the self as a permanent improvable project (Han 2015: 8-11; 46-49; 50-51).

Han's analysis of the *achievement society* is closely linked to his account of digital communication. According to Han, the contemporary subject inhabits digital architectures that render her visible to everyone. He describes a *Homo digitalis* who, even when acting anonymously, nonetheless "has a profile" and "works ceaselessly at optimizing it," such that he becomes somebody exhibiting himself and vying for attention" (Han 2017: 10-11). The networked world has become a space where everyone watches and is watched by everyone else at the same time - visibility no longer needs to be enforced top down, because "everyone wants to be present personally and directly" and to present an opinion "without a middleman" (ibid: 15-16). Visibility has become desirable, and the subject takes it up personally by drawing attention to herself by the constant pressure to post, respond, and update within what Han describes as the temporality of the "immediate present" (ibid: 15; 71-75).

The *achievement subject* is no longer coerced to work; she is "free" to pursue projects, careers, lifestyles, yet this freedom is structured so that saying "yes" to herself always coincides with saying "yes" to the demands of productivity (Han 2015: 8-11). Her attention is directed at the ongoing monitoring and management of her own activities and capacities, and toward the assessment of outcomes in relation to optimization-oriented norms (ibid: 8-11; 30-34). The temporal structure of attention is shortened, since it is distributed across a plurality of tasks and contexts that require immediacy, continual adjustment, and responsiveness (Han 2017: 15-16). At the same time, attention becomes externally indexed: its allocation is guided by signals of engagement, circulation, and resonance that originate outside the subject (Han 2017: 10-16; 71-75).

In this neoliberal environment, individual attention becomes instrumental, oriented to what advances performance, and the possibility of a receptive, non-appropriative orientation recedes. This instrumentalization of attention generates a structural tendency toward exhaustion. The *achievement subject* is not confronted with fixed demands that could, in principle, be fulfilled, but with an open-ended imperative to self-optimize (Han 2015: 8 -11, 30-34). The neoliberal regime does not mark a clear boundary between activity and non-activity, and the disappearance of pauses deprives attention the capacity for interruption (ibid: 21-24, 46-52). These conditions, together with the permanent demand to remain attentive, available, and optimizable, lead to chronique fatigue and exhaustion,

creating the structural conditions for the *burned-out achievement society* (ibid: 30-34, 35-52; Han 2017: 15-16).

1.3. On the … Other?!

Under these conditions of instrumental self-centered attention, the classical idea of a public sphere gives way to what he calls "the swarm" (Han 2017: 9-14). The crowd, even in its irrationality, still presupposed a capacity to form a "we," a shared orientation and a collective mood (ibid). Han's swarm is defined by *hyperconnectedness* and fragmentation; it is populated by a mass of individuals whose communication is instantaneous but devoid of reflection (ibid). Distance – the space necessary for contemplation, respect, and the acknowledgment of otherness – is eroded. As Han puts it, the digital medium is a "medium of affect" (ibid). The digital swarm replaces *we* with *me* (Han 2017: 9-14), *the Other* with the *Same* (ibid; Han 2018: 1-8). Political discourse becomes volatile because of outrage and indignation, scrapping any understanding of the collective (Han 2017: 9-14, 63-71).

Han argues this is the result of the progressive weakening of the conditions under which *the Other* can appear. *The Other* is very important for Han, as she confronts the subject with what does not immediately coincide with her preferences or image of the world, this way interrupting the reproduction of *the Same* (Han 2015: 1-7; Han 2018: 1-4). *The Other* introduces *negativity*[1] into social relations, and this negativity is a crucial precondition for experience, judgement, and meaningful public discourse (Han 2018: 5-10). Politically, this is indispensable because it sustains the conditions under which plural judgment and common orientation can emerge, insofar as a public sphere requires encounters with perspectives that cannot be immediately self-affirmed but instead demand deliberation (Han 2017: 7-9, 63-71; Han 2018: 3-10).

[1] *Negativity* introduces delay, friction, and distance, thereby opening a space in which new experience can occur (ibid; Han 2015: 1-7).

2. Chapter II: Attention Beyond the Will: Simone Weil on Perception, Necessity, and the Reality of Others

Chapter I argued that contemporary societies face a structural change in the conditions governing attention. It showed how neoliberal self-exploitation, digital hyper-communication, and therapeutic individualization dissolve the shared world that makes collective life intelligible. Against this backdrop, the central question becomes whether a conception of attention that does not merely refine the individual's skills of self-regulation and that is not absorbed into the logic of optimization exists.

This chapter offers Weil's understanding of attention as an alternative. It does so by examining her deviation from the dominant model of modern mind, exemplified by John Locke, which identifies attention with voluntary mental effort and the will's selective control over ideas. This work reads Locke's conceptional form of attention as compatible with the productive and self-regulatory logic of neoliberalism analyzed in Chapter I. It then develops Weil's contrasting view of attention as radical receptivity, an inward posture grounded in desire and consent, and situated within a metaphysical structure of necessity, gravity, and grace.

The analysis has shown that while the will is not eliminated from Weil's account, its role is very limited and negative: it may remove obstacles, but it cannot produce truth, goodness, or attention itself. Attention emerges instead from the soul's desire to consent to reality as it is, including necessity, and precedes judgment, cognition, and moral action[2]. The chapter thus establishes Weil's account as a genuine alternative to the modern, will-centered models of attention, while leaving open an important question: whether such an inward discipline can resist being appropriated as a form of retreat or self-management under contemporary conditions. This question forms the point of departure for the next chapter.

[2] To this end, it worth briefly noting that Weil does not reject thinking altogether: she treats thought and focused attention as necessary preparatory exercises for cultivating genuine *attention*, though not *attention* itself (Weil 1951: 105-117).

2.1. The Modern Definition of Attention

A natural point of transition from the diagnosis developed in Chapter I is to examine the dominant modern conception of attention that continues to structure how subjects are expected to relate to the world. This view finds its root in John Locke's understanding of attention. In an *Essay Concerning Human Personality,* Locke characterizes attention as a deliberate faculty that regulates which ideas are brought under consideration in the formation of judgment. For him, the mind is not immediately in contact with the outside world, but instead with its own ideas about it; and to attend is to choose from among these ideas, those that will be used for further reckoning. Locke writes that truth consists in "the joining or separating of Signs[3], as the Things signified by them do agree or disagree one with another" (Locke 1690/1999: 565). This reflects Locke's correspondence theory of truth, on which a belief counts as true when its ideas accurately correspond to external reality. So, he equates attention with the will's capacity to select relevant signs, mediated by the ideas the mind actively handles, and reflected upon as a structured exercise of volition.

This view carries several implications. First, it assumes that cognition proceeds through mental effort, by a "due application of our natural facilities" (Locke 1999: 57). Second, it identifies attention with the subject's power of control over her own thoughts. And third, it treats thought as the medium through which the world becomes intelligible. The Lockean subject is, then, the manager of her understanding: she arranges the ideas in her mind, imposes order upon them, and in the continuous process of this mental exercise moves toward truth through the disciplined use of will. Taken together, these implications mean that the Lockean model of attention is far closer to the self-regulating, performance-oriented *achievement subject*, and may therefore by understood as compatible with the neoliberal governance logic diagnosed in Chapter I.

[3] By "signs", Locke refers to the mediating elements of human understanding and communication: words signify ideas, and ideas in turn signify things. Therefore, Locke perceives of truth as the "correct" ordering and comparison of these signs.

2.2.Attention as Radical Receptivity: On Experiencing the Real

Simone Weil's account of attention sharply diverges from the dominant Lockean model (Weil 1951; Weil 2002). Weil maintains that "attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object" (ibid: 111). For Weil, she who strives to master her thoughts, or who approaches the world through conceptual manipulation, does not bring herself nearer to reality. Weil makes this point quite explicitly: "The will only controls a few movements and a few muscles" (Weil 2002: 116-117). The will's domain is limited to effort, repetition, and the execution of tasks; it is not the faculty by which the subject perceives what is real. To identify attention with will, therefore, is to misunderstand its nature.

Weil insists that the acts important for truth – seeing, listening, longing – cannot be performed through volition (Weil 1951; Weil 2002). They require instead a form of consent. "Attention is bound up with desire. Not with the will but with desire – or more exactly, consent" (Weil 1951: 118). Consent names the essential psychological mechanism that contrasts will in Weil's account. It has three interconnected dimensions. First, there is consent to necessity: the acceptance of the structure of reality independent of one's wishes. Second, there is consent to the object itself: an openness that allows the real to present itself as it is. Third, there is consent to affliction: the readiness to acknowledge suffering without recourse to compensatory illusions. Each form of consent presupposes the same inner gesture, namely the renunciation of the will's drive to assert itself.

To clarify what Weil means by consent, the analysis now turns to a brief reconstruction of the metaphysical assumptions that inform her account of attention. Weil's mystical metaphysics is speculative and difficult to understand properly. What she calls God cannot be understood as an object of the intellect; at most, it would be a representation of God on our part (Weil 1951: esp. 137-208; Weil 2002: 26-51). We therefore cannot direct our attention toward God, but only toward what can also be an object for us, such as the beauty of the world or our fellow human beings. This way, as we will see, something of God can shine through us. Simone Weil started about God after her mystical experiences, which she had regularly from 1935 onward. This section thus further understands her metaphysics primarily as Weil's way of doing justice to her experiences of receptivity.

In Weil's account, attention should be understood against a structure of reality shaped by creation, distance, and necessity. Weil describes creation as an act of divine renunciation: "On God's part creation is not an act of self-expansion but of restraint and renunciation. God and all his creatures are less than God alone. God accepted this diminution. He emptied a part of his being from himself" (Weil 1951: 145). Creation is not divine self-expansion, but a voluntary withdrawal that allows something other than God to exist. This withdrawal establishes what she calls distance: "This universe where we are living, and of which we form a tiny particle, is the distance put by Love between God and God" (ibid: 127). The created world is therefore marked simultaneously by God's absence and by His trace, but remains meaningful precisely because it was created by Him (ibid: 132-133).

Because creation only exists through God's withdrawal, it unfolds under the condition of necessity, which is the impersonal, mechanical order governing matter. "Space, time, and the mechanism that governs matter are the distance. Everything we call evil is only this mechanism" (ibid: 127). Suffering and misfortune belong to this realm because they follow the mechanical laws of a world from which God willfully chose to withdraw (ibid: 117-137; Weil 2002: 32-40). As she writes: "Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be" (Weil 2002: 33). Human beings, as part of God's creation, are confined to this order of necessity (Weil 1951: 127, 129; 33); but since the human being is created in the image of God[4], something of Him remains present in every human soul, manifesting itself as a *desire* oriented toward God (ibid: 128-131).

Since necessity comprises the structure of reality, one cannot escape obedience to it: "A creature cannot but obey" (Weil 1951: 129). She names *gravity* as one of the orientations of obedience to necessity (ibid: 128-129). Gravity is the automatic movement of the soul: the spontaneous pull of fear, resentment, ego-defense, and fantasy.[5] In Waiting for God, Weil compares this orientation to falling: when a person "turns away from God, he simply gives himself up to the law of gravity. Then he thinks that he can decide and choose, but he is only a thing, a stone that falls" (ibid: 128).

[4] I use 'image of God' here as a shorthand for Weil's claim that there is a point in the soul oriented beyond gravity, expressed as desire for obedience.

[5] See Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, esp. pp. 1, 7, 13–14, 32, 47, 53, 77, where gravity is described as the law-governed movement of the soul manifesting in fear, self-justification, imagination, and ego-centered reactions.

Gravity, however, is not the only possible orientation of obedience. Weil argues that when we "desire obedience […] a new necessity is added… a necessity constituted by laws belonging to supernatural things" (ibid: 128-129). It is the gesture through which the soul becomes capable of receiving what she calls *grace*, which is an energy that does not originate in the self nor in the impersonal, mechanical order governing matter that also determines the self (Weil 2002: 1, 3, 10-11). Weil states that, in order to receive grace, the soul must empty itself, just like God created the world by emptying himself (ibid: 10-11, 32-34). This "new necessity" does not eliminate the mechanical necessity governing created beings; it operates alongside it. Weil's image of the seed clarifies this relation: "If we consent, God puts a little seed in us and he goes away again. From that moment God has no more to do; neither have we, except to wait" (Weil 1951: 133). The seed grows painfully, and "we cannot avoid destroying whatever gets in its way, pulling up the weeds, cutting the good grass," even though this operation "is part of our very flesh" (ibid).

Weil's analogy of the seed and weeds articulates a distinct relation between effort and transformation that departs from the Lockean voluntarist model of attention. The "seed" names what can begin to grow in one's soul once it [the soul] becomes capable of receptivity, while the "weeds" name the obstacles that belong to the soul's ordinary condition under gravity (ibid: 128-130). "To get rid" of the "weeds", she assigns the will a role, but a very limited one (ibid: 193-195). She distinguishes between the effort proper to attention and consent, which resembles "the effort of looking and listening," and what ordinary language calls will, which suggests "muscular effort" (ibid). This is the sense in which "the weeds are pulled up by the muscular effort of the peasant, but only sun and water can make the corn grow" (ibid). The analogy thus clarifies how Weil departs from the Lockean model of attention as volitional mastery, by grounding transformation in a desire of the soul to loosen the hold of gravity, while assigning will only the limited task of clearing obstacles for the soul to desire *consent*.

Consent marks a different attitude towards obeying, a different posture towards the real. It is grounded in the idea that reality is God's creation, including the necessity of the 'laws of gravity' within us and our own 'evil' tendencies (ibid: 128-130). To consent means to accept without resistance what has already occurred, and to acknowledge the necessity that has unfolded in one's life (ibid); but it does not deny the responsibility to root out the

evil that is still present within oneself (ibid:133). On the contrary, precisely because we consent to everything that has happened up until now, we become fully responsible for how we act in the future: Weil emphasizes that "a man does not perform the same actions if he gives his consent to obedience as if he does not" (ibid: 129). Through consenting to the past, the soul desires to do God's will in the future. One does not, upon consenting, simply affirm each inclination dictated by gravity; rather, one accepts the structure of necessity as the condition under which genuine moral transformation becomes possible.

3. Chapter III: Attention, Affliction, and Ethical Formation

Chapter III addresses an implicit problem identifiable in the diagnosis of Chapter I. If contemporary forms of power operate by converting interior life into a site of productivity, adaptability, and emotional control, then any inward discipline risks being appropriated as another technique of retreat or self-management. Chapter III therefore examines whether Weil's conception of attention can be distinguished from therapeutic or coping-oriented practices. The chapter proceeds by first reconstructing a line of critique according to which inward attentional practices are politically insufficient because they involve withdrawal from the shared world. Hannah Arednt's analysis of the *vita contemplativa* is taken as the foundation for this concern (Arendt 1978a) and is complimented by contemporary critiques by Slavoj Žižek (2014), Eva Illouz (2008), and William Davies (2015).

Having established this objection, the chapter turns to Weil's conception of attention and examines her treatment of affliction, taking affliction as the point at which a different orientation, non-instrumental, attention becomes possible (Weil 1951). The analysis traces how attention, as Weil describes it, is directed toward suffering and resists assimilation and functional integration. In addition, it demonstrates how this outward orientation toward the afflicted departs from forms of attention organized around coping and emotional regulation (Žižek 2014; Illouz 2008; Davies 2015). The argument thus clarifies how Weil's account of attention supports an ethical formation oriented toward responsibility rather than a therapeutic orientation aimed at coping with the system.

3.1. The Problem of Inwardness

Chapter III begins by recalling the diagnosis in Chapter I, namely that contemporary modes of neoliberal power operate by organizing interior life itself as a site of governance, thereby shaping attention as an inward practice focused on productivity, adaptability, and emotional management. I begin by developing a set of conditions of adequacy that inward attentional practices must satisfy to counter the logic of neoliberalism. The move is guided by intuition, and from the internal logic of the argument, that if these criteria stand in direct opposition to the patterns diagnosed in Chapter I, then the resulting account is the starting point for an ethical, and in due course political, understanding of attention. Two conditions are proposed. First, an inward attentional practice must resist instrumentalization, meaning it should not be treated as a means for enhancing performance. And second, an inward attentional practice must sustain an outward-directed orientation that appreciates the reality

of other persons independently of the subject's projections. This chapter now presents a line of objection according to which inward attentional practices fail to satisfy these conditions.

Hannah Arendt's objection to *vita contemplativa* is taken as a starting point. She treats thinking and contemplation as activities that, by their nature, withdraw from the space of appearance in which political life takes place. Thinking for her is "non-appearing by definition" since it requires the subject to deliberately withdraw from the world *altogether* (Arendt 1978a: 75). Of course, Arendt does assign thinking moral significance, since she understands it as an internal dialogue through which the subject anticipates having to live with herself after a wrongdoing, thereby placing constraints on certain forms of action (ibid: 187-191). Yet she is explicit that, from a political standpoint, the decisive issue is not whether the agent can preserve inner moral dignity, but that a wrong has occurred in the world itself. The most important political responsibility for Arendt is oriented toward the repair and preservation of a shared world: "As citizens, we must prevent wrongdoings because the world in which we all live … is at stake." (ibid: 182). Thus, Arendt objects to a view that inward attentional practices, even when oriented toward moral coherence, can substitute political responsibility, since political life requires a direct form of engagement with the shared world.

Under neoliberal conditions, subjects increasingly turn to hip attentional practices that promise relief from suffering, stability, and peace. But modern critiques argue that they, too, reproduce a form of withdrawal like Arendt's *vita contemplative* (Žižek 2014; Illouz 2008; Davies 2015). These practices include therapy (Illouz 2008), mindfulness and health applications (Davies 2015), meditation, and popularized forms of Buddhism (Žižek 2014, ch. 3). The inward turn is described by these authors as a set of coping practices through which the neoliberal subject might adapt to systemic pressures but is moved further away from the shared world. These critiques thus corroborate Arendt's concern that inward attentional practices tend to redirect attention away from the common world and from political action. The question that follows is therefore whether Simone Weil's conception of attention provides the ethical resources required to address this concern.

3.2. The Contours of the Other

I now turn to Weil's analysis of affliction (Weil 1951: 117-137) to articulate her ethics. The figure of the afflicted provides a good point of entry into her ethics for several reasons. Importantly, it functions as a conceptual counterpoint to the figure of *the Other* in Han's diagnosis of neoliberal subjectivity (Han 2015; Han 2018). In addition, it clarifies, at once, the form of receptivity attention requires, the conditions under which ethical relations to others become possible, and the limits of instrumental approaches to moral action.

For Weil, affliction (malheur) is the condition in which a person encounters necessity in its pure form as the mechanical indifference of events to human hopes and dignity (Weil 1951: 117-120). Weil distinguishes affliction to other forms of suffering that remain, to a great extent, manageable. Physical pain, like toothache, for example, is a very "unimportant matter and leaves no trace in the soul" (Weil 1951: 118). Psychological sorrow can also be softened or replaced when it is not anchored in something like physical or quasi-physical pain (cf. ibid: 117-118). By contrast, in affliction an "event that has seized and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical" (ibid: 119). Moreover, affliction is social in its character, since it comes with "social degradation or the fear of it in some form" (ibid). From this, affliction should not be understood as an inner "bad" or "depressive" mood; it should also not be understood as an unfortunate singular event; affliction is a situation in which the person's body, status, relationships, and the sense of self are all torn down at once in an appalling fashion, and experience resembling death while life continues (ibid: 117-120).

Affliction "seizes the very souls of the innocent and takes possession of them as their sovereign lord" (ibid: 118-119). God has given affliction this power. At best, "he who is branded by affliction will keep only half his soul" (ibid: 120). In the worst cases, the soul is crushed like a "half-crushed worm" (ibid: 118-119) that has no words to express what is happening. Those who have never experienced affliction cannot even imagine this state, even if they have suffered greatly (ibid: 118-120).

This is why it is so difficult to attend and show compassion to the afflicted is "almost an impossibility" (ibid: 118). Humans prefer to close their eyes on affliction because it reveals the truth of necessity, and this truth is intolerable for those who are guided by the

forces of gravity (ibid: 118-120). The afflicted often experience help as a confirmation of their degradation, while the one who helps the afflicted often affirms their own moral worth through the act (ibid: 118-123).

Only through genuine attention, the kind described in Chapter II, can one truly attend to the person in need. Weil describes true compassion as a miracle because it requires maintaining attention toward someone whom society tries to reject (ibid: 118). Being attentive to affliction is the only way to receive it in its full reality, and without fear, pity, disgust, or abstraction (ibid: 118-120). Attention refuses both intrinsic identification and the moralizing distance that often accompanies charitable discourse – it allows the afflicted to be seen for who they are (ibid: 118-123). Weil's notion of attention becomes the only posture in which another person can be encountered as they are, without being reduced to an object of repair, consolidation, or moral reassurance (Weil 1951). In essence, attention is an outward-directed ethical posture that makes responsibility toward the afflicted possible without converting that responsibility into action guided by self-confirmation or utility.

The examination shows that Weil's account of attention toward the afflicted neither functions as a technique of self-regulation nor remains confined to the subject's interior life. Instead, it is oriented toward a reality that resists appropriation, optimization, and use. In this respect, the attentive posture toward the afflicted marks a significant departure from the way the *achievement subject* treats *the Other* in Han's diagnosis (Han 2015: 1-11; Han 2018: 1-10). *The Other* in neoliberal psychopolitics appears as an obstacle of performance or a stimulus to reaction, while the afflicted appears in her fullest to the attentive subject, without her images being instrumentalized or projected. Attention, as Weil understands it, is thus not aligned with the circuits of productivity, coping, or self-affirmation. It is an ethical posture that interrupts instrumental reason and reorients the subject toward reality (Han 2015; Han 2018).

4. Chapter IV: The Political Value of Attention

Chapter IV turns from the ethical formation of attention to the political value of Simone Weil's conception of attention. The chapter traces the development of Weil's notion of attention as taking shape in response to concrete political pathologies, prior to its later metaphysical articulation. It demonstrates how her later mystical work, reconstructed in Chapter II, develops her earlier intuition that attention is required for sustaining political judgment, responsibility, and common orientation (Weil 1934/2005; Weil 2002b; Weil 2005). As a result, attention emerges as a political response to the erosion of the common world. To this end, Weil further argues that attention must be institutionally cultivated, most clearly in her reflections on school studies, where education is reimagined as a practice for forming sustained attention to reality and to others (Weil 1951).

The argument unfolds as follows. Section 4.1 reconstructs Weil's diagnosis of modernity as a condition of disequilibrium between human faculties and the force of social reality, drawing primarily on "Sketch of Contemporary Social Life", collected in *Opression and Liberty* (Weil 1934/2005: 102-115). This section presents Weil's description of a world which is no longer intelligible to human understanding, resulting not only in alienation but in a collective increasingly vulnerable to manipulation. Section 4.2 develops the claim that she understands attention as what makes political judgment under conditions of social disequilibrium. Drawing on "Human Personality" (Weil 2005) and *The Need for Roots* (Weil 2002b), it shows how Weil's conception of obligation and impersonality ground the political significance of attention. Finally, section 4.3 turns to *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies* (Weil 1951: 105-117) to clarify the institutional elements in Weil's account of attention. Although written during her metaphysical period, the section argues the school studies should be read as continuous with her political diagnosis and shows that Weil regards attention as a capacity that must be institutionally cultivated.

The chapter develops historically, tracing the continuity between Weil's early political diagnosis and her later metaphysical and pedagogical writings. In addition, it prepares the concluding claim that attention, in Weil's sense, is not private but a condition of public life, and that her understanding, rather than being an abstract mysticism, is anchored in concrete political and historical experiences that are strikingly similar to those we experience now (Weil 1934/2005; Weil 2002b).

4.1.Weil on Modernity

This section, through a close reading of Simone Weil's chapter "Sketch of Contemporary Social Life" (1934/2005), demonstrates the political and social conditions that made Weil turn to this metaphysical, for some mystical, account of attention. Weil wrote this text in the early 1930s, prior to the series mystical experiences she later described between 1935 and 1938, which subsequently reoriented the form and the language of her work. She is writing in interwar Europe, amid industrial and bureaucratic expansion and the emergence of mass society[6], Weil anticipates many of the structural dynamics that Byung-Chul Han later identifies in neoliberal societies. In the text, she conducts a diagnosis of the political and social conditions of her times and draws a very sorrow conclusion: she presents a world soaked up in necessity and identifies several institutional mechanisms that crush thought, distort perception, and remake human beings into subjects serving these mechanisms.

Weil begins with a stark claim: "Never has the individual been so completely delivered up to a blind collectivity, and never have men been less capable… of even thinking" (Weil 1934/2005: 102). The modern world has expanded in scale, speed, and complexity beyond the measure of human facilities. One is not merely alienated, she is in a state of disequilibrium, in which there is "a monstrous discrepancy between man's body, man's mind, and the things which… constitute the elements of human existence" (ibid). The individual cannot grasp the totality of economic life, nor the working of technology, nor the consequences of political power. In this disequilibrium, human thought becomes too small for grasping the world and gives way to what Weil calls "blind collectivity" (ibid). The individual loses not only her agency, because she must orient her action by what the mechanisms demand, but also her perceptual coherence, since she no longer guides her actions by what she sees.

Further, she expands on a Marxian idea of the inversion of the relationship between means and ends by stating that "machines do not run to enable men to live; we resign ourselves to feeding men in order that they may serves the machines" (ibid: 105). In such a world, value is determined not by what is good or just but what is efficient under the

[6] A form of social organization in which individuals are integrated into large-scale economic and administrative systems.

system's own terms (ibid: 106). And because these terms are opaque, individuals turn to myths, fantasy, idols, and conspirational images to make sense of their powerlessness and confusion, in a social world that Weil calls a "nightmare filled with monsters" (ibid: 111).

But arguably, these mechanisms are what in Weil metaphysics is described as necessity and gravity. They are not evil in the moral sense; they are expressions of necessity operating on an institutional, social, and political scale. The mechanisms follow their own logic of indifference, and the subject, the afflicted subject, becomes exposed to a force she cannot oppose. The world she describes is a world in which attention has eroded. Through a reading of Sketches, it becomes evident how politically crucial it is to maintain attention, as "the lack of free thought makes it possible to impose… doctrines entirely devoid of meaning" (ibid: 112). What she implicitly states then is that authoritarianism is not accidental, but effectively possible in societies structurally vulnerable to it. Or those, in which attention is absent.

4.2. The Political Function of Attention

The diagnosis in Section 4.1 raises a question: how can a human being, for whom modern social mechanisms have become unintelligible, nonetheless resist political degradation? In the previous section, I showed that Weil offers a disturbing image in which the social machinery makes even the act of thinking to be rare. "Methodical thought is progressively disappearing," she writes, and "we have almost lost the notion of what real thought is" (ibid: 103; 104). Here I argue that Weil identifies attention as the answer, understood as the faculty through which judgment, obligation and responsibility remain possible even under conditions of social disequilibrium.

At the end of the chapter (ibid: 110-114) Weil argues that a real political task in not to supply a new program, but to restore the capacity by which reality can again appear as common. In other words, Weil holds that when social mechanisms have made it almost impossible for the human to perceive reality, politics cannot begin with new programs of institutions; it should, instead, start with the restoration of attention as the minimal capacity through which reality can be perceived with a clear mind and judgment can resist being absorbed into the dominant structure. For this reason, she concludes that neither reform, nor revolution, nor institutional redesign can "switch the course of history" (ibid: 110-111). But what can still be done, she argues, is astonishingly modest: "awaken a little thought

wherever it is possible" and "introduce a little play into the cogs of the machines that is grinding us down" (ibid: 113-114).

This line of argument is taken up again in *The Need for Roots* (Weil 2002b) and *Human Personality* (Weil 2005), where she explores attention not as a private faculty but as a capacity with political relevance. Written after *Sketches* and in direct continuity with its diagnosis of bureaucratic and social disintegration, *The Need for Roots* extends that analysis further. It is composed in 1943, after she wrote the notebooks containing more explicitly mystical thought, later collected as *Gravity and Grace* (Weil 2002) and *Waiting for God* (Weil 1951), and in the context of her exile and the collapse of the French Republic.

Just like *Sketches, The Need for Roots* addresses the mechanization of modern life as the central focus of analysis but reformulates its effects as a condition of *uprootedness*. In the essay, Weil claims that a political agency can endure insofar as social institutions support forms of work, education, and collective life that all sustain a sense of responsibility and attention to reality. *Human Personality,* written shorter thereafter, demonstrates that, in the presence of suitable institutions capable of cultivating a capable political agent, the source of social obligation becomes the impersonal expectation that "good and not evil" will be done to every human being (Weil 2005: 2007). Together, the two texts establish attention as a political capacity that depends simultaneously on an impersonal structure of obligation and on the institutional conditions that allow it to endure.

4.3. Institutional Conditions of Attention

Weil accordingly turns to schooling as an institutional site in which attention can be formed and stabilized as a shared political capacity. To recall the school essay, she describes attention as the soul's capacity "to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth" (Weil 1951: 115), and clearly states that this capacity is the essence of receptivity to reality (ibid). She writes that "our first duty toward school children is to make known this method" of attention (ibid: 113). In institutional terms, she believes this to be the only counterforce to the dominance of the mechanism of modernity – the cultivation of subjects capable of perceiving reality without illusion.

At first sight, the claims she makes in her essay are of pedagogical nature, since in it, she defends ideas of the need for intellectual discipline and reminds the reader that

schoolwork forms not only the mind but the soul (ibid: 105-117). But the argument she makes is also a social one: she states that every serious study is a rehearsal for justice. Although Weil does not use the language of "justice" in her *School Studies,* her analysis implies that schoolwork is a training of the faculties that make justice possible. Since attention is the condition for love of the neighbor (ibid: 113-114), and since this love grounds social obligation (Weil 2002b: 4-5), study of attention becomes, implicitly, the preliminary step towards justice.

The practices she describes in the essay can thus be directly linked to the way a society must organize the formation of minds if it hopes to generate citizens capable of justice. Therefore, study, for Weil, is the prototype of political attention. This claim also aligns with Weil's insistence that obligations precede rights (Weil 2005) and that institutions must cultivate the faculties required to perceive the reality of others (Weil 2002: 3-10). An hour spent on a geometry problem in which we make no progress is not wasted, since "this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul" (Weil 1951: 106). The point of studying is not mastery of content but mastery of a moral posture. Thus, education for Weil is the institution through which society teaches its members how to perceive reality without distortion, how to suspend fantasy and projections, and how to prepare themselves to encounter the other.

Conclusion

The thesis set out from the claim that late modern societies face not merely episodic distraction but a structural crisis of attention. Drawing on Han, it argued that neoliberal psychopolitics and digital hypercommunication occupy and reorganize the attention of the modern human being. They redirect it toward performance, self-monitoring, and reactive visibility, while weakening the conditions under which persons can attend to one another as participants in a shared world (Han 2015; Han 2017; Han 2018). Further, read in continuity with Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, this diagnosis suggested modern power increasingly operates by shaping self-relation and affective responsiveness rather than by direct prohibition, resulting in a loss of sustained, outward-oriented attention, which political judgment presupposes (Foucault 1977; Han 2015).

Against this context, the thesis turned to Simone Weil to ask whether an alternative conception of attention can resist assimilation into self-optimization while sustaining orientation toward others and the common world. Chapter II reconstructed Weil's account of attention in contrast to the Lockean model as a posture of receptivity rather than a function of will (Locke 1690/1999; Weil 1951; Weil 2002). It became clear that Weil describes attention as an effort of suspension: the subject refrains from appropriation and allows reality to present itself without being replaced by projections (Weil 1951; Weil 2002). Her language of necessity, gravity, and grace clarified why this posture cannot be reduced to a technique of intensified focus. Attention, as she understands it, is the condition for receiving truth and for encountering others without instrumentalization (Weil 1951; Weil 2002).

Chapter III then addressed a worry that any inward discipline can become a privatized coping strategy. Arendt's critique of the *vita contemplativa* articulated that withdrawal from appearances tends to withdraw from the world itself, and contemporary critics of therapeutic attention argued that mindfulness and self-help often functions as ideological supplements that stabilize rather than contest neoliberal conditions (Arendt 1978a; Žižek 2014; Illouz 2008; Davies 2015). The chapter argued that Weil's attention does not take the form of interior self-management. Her analysis of affliction indicates that genuine attention interrupts the subject's tendency to self-reinforce and instead binds her to reality. In fact, it was demonstrated that Weil's attention allows one to reorient outward, toward the afflicted and toward the reality of suffering of others (Weil 1951).

Chapter IV developed the central claim of the thesis, namely that Weil's mystical notion of attention remains continuous with her earlier political diagnosis and should be read as a response to concrete political pathologies. In *Sketches* she describes a world in which the social mechanism erodes the capacity for thought and perception, rendering populations vulnerable to authoritarianism (Weil 1934/2005). To resist this process, Weil names the central political task as the cultivation of attention, through which humans can perceive reality without distortion. *The Need for Roots* and "Human Personality" further pursue this task by specifying the institutional supports of attention (Weil 2002b) and the form of obligation that binds attention to others in political life (Weil 2005). Read together, these texts show that attention, for Weil, is not a mystical refuge, but a political capacity that names the minimal condition under which obligation can be recognized, judgment can be exercised, and a shared world can be sustained in the face of social disintegration.

This brings the thesis to its concluding remarks. Weil treats attention as the condition under which political reality can again appear as common, and she therefore treats its cultivation as the most hopeful form of political work available under conditions of social crisis. The argument does not claim that attention replaces institutions, laws, or collective action. Instead, it claims that these alone cannot function as instruments of renewal unless human beings are in their full capacity to perceive, judge, and respond to reality. Weil's attention could be viewed as responding directly to the crisis diagnosed in Chapter I through Han's analysis. She specifies a capacity that neoliberalism actively deforms, namely, a non-instrumental receptive posture through which the world and other persons can appear without being reduced to projections, in their entirety, in all their colors, uniqueness, and hardships. To conclude, Weil's conception of attention is a capacity through which a common political world could again become intelligible.

To boot, Han's diagnosis makes Weil's claim more, not less, urgent. If neoliberal conditions systematically degrade attention, and if attention is a necessary condition for political judgment (Han 2015; Han 2017; Han 2018), then the erosion of attention is not a secondary cultural problem but a direct political difficulty. The "cure" is situated precisely in the attentional capacity the diagnosis says is currently disappearing.

Another problem is that the contemporary institutional and social conditions through which attention is ordinary formed now instead undermine it. In *The Need for Roots*, as well as in her essay education, Weil explicitly confronts this by arguing that education should take

a central political function as the institutional form through which attention can be developed. In general, Weil assigns great importance to the preservation of institutional practices oriented toward the development of perceptual and moral capacities on which any just political order depends.

In this light, an interesting point of further inquiry could be to ask whether contemporary education systems help cultivate this kind of patient, reality-directed attention Weil describes, or whether they increasingly reproduce the achievement subject diagnosed by Han. If later is the case, then education does not merely fail to remedy the crisis of attention but can be considered one of its primary causes. In view of the above, the thesis concludes with a limited claim: Simone Weil's clarifies attention as a prerequisite of political life which, under contemporary conditions, is systematically weakened. The task that follows is then to consider how this capacity for attention might be sustained and restored in our neoliberal fast-paced times.

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