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Compassion, Consolation and the Sharing of Attention

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Submitted version (uncorrected)

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The difficulty of showing authentic compassion is a major preoccupation of Simone Weil's work. This difficulty is primarily understood in terms of the way that thought "flies" from intense suffering "as promptly and irresistibly as an animal flies from death".¹ Compassion is conceived by Weil as being at the centre of all authentic spirituality, and as a kind of litmus test for truthful engagement with the world (and with God). Compassion relies upon the giving of attention, and to give one's attention to one who suffers means to resist a powerful urge which is felt at physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual levels. Attention, in turn, is considered most often as a kind of openness, or receptivity; a willingness to encounter—or even be penetrated by—what is given in the real.² Weil suggests in a number of places that the power to attend is right at the centre of personal identity, and supplies the only real possibility of acting upon one's character (a suggestion that Iris Murdoch developed in *Sovereignty of Good*).³ Finally, these two aspects of Weil's thought are closely aligned with a third; her pervasive suspicion of "consolation". On the whole, consolation is aligned with the "imagination" that insulates and removes one from reality.⁴ One can console oneself when suffering with thoughts about the future,⁵ or with attempts to explain one's suffering as a part of some larger, coherent whole or as a necessary means to some desirable end.⁶ Equally, one can cushion oneself from any real encounter with the suffering of others with similarly evasive movements of thought: one begins to see the suffering other as representative of a class of people defined by such suffering; thereafter, their situation no longer seems surprising.⁷

I take Weil's understanding of the matters briefly summarised above to be profound and phenomenologically convincing in any number of ways. Nevertheless, my aim in this chapter is

to raise some questions about this picture. Put simply, my argument is as follows: even though Weil is deeply sensitive to the ways that the capacity for attention determines one's way of relating to others, on the whole she conceives of attention as a private operation of the individual "soul". However, there are good reasons to think that in many cases, attention is something shared, even to the point where one might wish to talk about a "joint subject" of attention.⁸ I hope to show that examination of the way that attention is shared in compassion helps to bring to light ways in which such attention might be "creative", to use a term that Weil herself uses on one occasion. Following from this, I hope to show that this shared dimension of attention may change how we conceive of the relationship between compassion and "consolation".

It is very apparent that this will discussion will not be able to address everything that would be necessary in order to fully bring the idea of joint attention to bear upon Weil's philosophy. There will remain some important questions to answer concerning how well the ideas below might integrate into Weil's religious metaphysics, especially concerning her underlying conception of the human person, and of the ultimate significance of human relations. Nevertheless, the picture that I have tried to sketch offers, I believe, a small but significant complication of Weil's account of attention, and a useful starting point for further exploration.

Attention and the Difficulty of Compassion

Weil's account of the nature of attention, its encounter with suffering, and its role in moral and spiritual life is one of the most thoroughly explored and commonly employed themes of her work, so I will try to give a fairly concise description of it here.⁹

Weil believed that compassion is difficult because it involves recognition of a basic truth about reality as a whole, and therefore of our own existential condition. So, although we encounter individual instances of suffering at particular moments, our capacity to respond with compassionate attention in these moments depends upon a willingness to accept a more universal truth about the human condition which is manifest in individual cases. Weil describes this truth in a number of different ways: that all those features that we most essentially identify as ourselves are subject to the mechanical workings of "necessity";¹⁰ that there is no final good to be found "here below";¹¹ or, as in her essay on the *Iliad*, the exposure of all that is most precious to blind force.¹² In each case, the point is the same: thought flies from affliction because it

presents us with that which we cannot, or will not, accept.¹³ In “Human Personality” this is memorably expressed in terms of the knowledge that I could lose, in a moment, everything that I consider essential to my sense of self:

Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction. To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: ‘I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.’¹⁴

And so for Weil, the resistance we may feel to giving attention to those whose suffering we encounter is evidence not so much of a lack of moral vigour or sensitivity (i.e. it is not primarily a failing of will, or of sensibility), but rather of a deep-seated fear and unwillingness to encounter the real.¹⁵ We walk past the afflicted because of the truth that they contain in their person. But if we can consent to pay attention to the afflicted, it means that we love reality because it is real, not because it is hospitable to our desires. Attention draws us out of the sphere of imagination in which we are, on the whole, immersed, and puts us into redemptive contact with reality.¹⁶

We can note two ways in which to understand the value of compassion, and the attention it is made of, on Weil’s account. Firstly, attention is that which is most essential on the path towards moral regeneration and spiritual liberation. Her understanding of what attention is, how it is cultivated and why it is valuable has to be understood in relation to some of the more obscure and speculative aspects of her thought: the idea of “decreation”, and the various speculative metaphysical structures that go along with it. However, for the purposes of this discussion it is the other side of the coin which is of greater interest: attention is also that which is called for, that which answers most deeply to the “cry” of suffering. The notebooks and essays are full of reflections on the first aspect: the way that attention is linked to a redemptive encounter with the real; the relationship between compassion and this kind of unflinching acceptance and affirmation. But, it seems to me, there is rather less reflection on the second point; this, in turn is perhaps because in the notebooks Weil seems far more concerned to give an account of the conditions of the possibility of giving attention than she is to give an account of what it is like to *receive* compassion. In order to explore what Weil might have to say about this

latter point, I will give a close reading of a few short passages from the essays contained in *Waiting on God*, which, I believe, can be seen as opening onto an important question about her understanding of attention.

Suffering as Question

At the end of the oft-quoted “Reflections on the Right use of School Studies”, Weil makes what initially seems to be the same point in two slightly different ways. After noting that the love of God and the love of neighbour both have attention for their substance, she writes:

Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one’s attention is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness and pity are not enough.¹⁷

Weil is perfectly aware that those who are “unhappy” may in fact need quite a number of things in addition to attention, but her point is that we must first of all become attentive in order to respond adequately to the needs of others (as she makes clear in “Forms of the Implicit Love God” and “The Love of God and Affliction”). Weil then seems to continue in the same vein when she continues:

In the first legend of the Grail, it is said that the Grail (the miraculous stone vessel which satisfies all hunger by virtue of the consecrated host) belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralysed by the most painful wound: ‘What are you going through?’

The love of neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’¹⁸

However, in fact, Weil has introduced an important distinction without noting, or perhaps being aware of it, in terms of the object of attention. In the first case, we have the idea that “the unhappy” themselves need to be the object of another’s attention: the compassionate direct their attention to those who suffer. Weil goes on to describe this attention in terms of an emptying: I empty the “contents” of my soul in order to receive into myself the other being.¹⁹ But in the second articulation, the attention that is required takes the form of a question that asks the sufferer *about their suffering*. Presumably, then, the eventual object of attention would be the answer that the sufferer gives to the question “what are you going through?” This would suggest

that receiving compassion is an experience of being heard, and if we interpret the second formulation as specifying more precisely what it means to “receive” into myself “the other being”, then we would have something like the following: in order to be compassionate, I must be receptive to the way in which the other is concerned with their suffering; with what they feel themselves to be “going through,” and how.

The idea that the deepest suffering is found in the form of a question is central to Weil; there are similar references throughout the notebooks, and she returns to a similar theme in her essay “Human Personality.” Here she discusses the difference between the conceptions of rights and justice: whereas the notion of rights concerns distribution, and arises in response to the question “why has somebody else got more than I have?”, justice concerns the prevention of harm, which has been done whenever the question “why am I being hurt?” arises involuntarily as a “surprised cry” within the person.²⁰ In both essays, then, we have the sense that compassion concerns questions, whether it is asking the redemptive question “what are you going through?” or listening compassionately to the question “why is this happening to me?”.

If we try to combine the phenomenology of these two questions, there is no way that we can think of the attentive experience straightforwardly in terms of an attentive subject and the intended/attended object. Firstly, it would seem as though Weil conceives of the power of the question “what are you going through?” *not* in terms of the opportunity for the sufferer to give a clear answer, precisely because as she understands it the experience that the question asks about can only be expressed *as* a question: the surprised cry “why is this happening to me?”. And so presumably if the question “what are you going through?” is a manifestation of love of neighbour it must be because it is a request to be invited *into* the other’s contemplation *of* that which they think on—the question they ask—so as to join them in it. Secondly, the question “why am I being hurt?” is not directed from the sufferer to their comforter. For Weil, this kind of question is ultimately directed in confusion at God, or the universe (which for Weil amounts to the same thing). It is a question ultimately directed to whatever it is that permits or makes possible such suffering.²¹ So again, if I ask “what are you going through?”, then I must learn to pay attention not just to the other, but to that which the question “why am I being hurt?” directs me; I must learn to pay attention *with* the questioning other.

This may seem like a rather fine distinction, but as I hope to show, I think it exposes something important about the question of what it is like to receive compassion, and the nature

of attention. This point can be developed through consideration of the figure of Job. In Job's case, there is his suffering, then his contemplation of that which causes him to suffer, and then there is further suffering that arises from this contemplation. He does not just suffer; he thinks on his suffering—he is unable *not* to think on his suffering. But, crucially, Job does not just think, obsessively, on his suffering; he thinks on his suffering *alone*. Even though his companions are able to pay attention to his situation, and to his distress, they are increasingly unable to attend to it in the way in which he attends to it; it cannot appear, to them, as it appears to him. That is, his companions are unable, or unwilling, to think on his suffering *as* morally perplexing, as a challenge to the goodness of God, as an outrage, and so on. And so, finally, he does not just think of his suffering alone; he thinks of his suffering alone *in the presence of others*. If there is a failure of compassion here, it is related to the failure to contemplate the suffering of another *as* and *with*; to contemplate it in its manner of appearing to them, with them. So it is not so much that something is not given, but more that something doesn't happen.

All this is suggested, rather than clearly affirmed, by the passages from Weil's essays that I have quoted above, but in some respects the picture that I have briefly sketched above is slightly different to the one that emerges as the "majority report" in Weil's work. Perhaps the best way to describe the kind of thing that Weil is trying to describe when she uses the term "attention" is in terms of a "posture".²² Her main efforts are spent in trying to describe the way in which this posture involves a self-displacement or renunciation, a loving patience, and a willing and receptive openness. It is passive in that it involves "waiting" for that to which it attends to disclose itself, but equally active: firstly, in the sense that this openness must be deliberately maintained; secondly in that it is always mingled with love. It "turns" toward the object of attention, but it does not move towards it; it "desires without approaching".²³ And for Weil, the faculty of attention is both the true location of personal agency, and an entirely solitary practice. After noting that the highest achievements in art or in science have a certain "impersonal" quality, she writes:

Impersonality is only reached by the practice of a form of attention which is rare in itself and impossible except in solitude; and not only a physical but mental solitude. This is never achieved by man who thinks of himself as a member of a collectivity, as part of something that says 'We'.

Men as parts of a collectivity are debarred from even the lower forms of the impersonal. A group of human beings cannot even add two and two.²⁴

One cultivates attention only by withdrawal from the socially constructed readings of the world that feed upon and further nourish imaginary desires. Equally, the part of the person that generates the “surprised cry” of injustice is the impersonal; the aspiration for the good, which exists in all people.²⁵ When, in the Marseilles notebooks, Weil comments that justice simply means recognising that the other exists, and that this recognition involves a stripping away of oneself, so as to conceive of oneself “as oneself and another” she seems to mean precisely this: that one recognises that there is simply one good, which is the same in all people – and this good *is* the desire for good.²⁶ Attention at its deepest level—and as a result, the experience of compassion—really does correspond with impersonality, and does not seem to cohere with the idea of unrepeatably specific interpersonal encounters. In the discussion that follows, I aim to show that Weil may have overlooked the way in which attention might, in some cases, be an irreducibly social phenomenon, so that compassion might, in turn, be thought of as a shared experience.

Joint Attention

In his book *The Ethical Demand*, Knud Ejler Løgstrup articulates a vision of ethical responsibility for the other based on a phenomenology of the way in which “our lives are in each other’s hands.” In reflecting upon the meaning of Jesus’ teaching about love of neighbour, Løgstrup writes:

If my relation to the other person is the place where my relation to God is determined, then it must at the same time be the place where that person’s existence is so totally at stake that to fail him is to fail him irreparably. [. . .] If human beings were so independent of one another that the words and deeds of one were only a dispensable luxury in the life of another and my failure in relation to the life of the neighbour could easily be made up later, then God’s relation to me would not be as intimately tied up with my relation to the neighbour as the proclamation of Jesus declares it to be.²⁷

Løgstrup’s attempt to render this into “strictly human terms” consists in showing, in a variety of senses, the way in which a “silent” demand emerges from the fact of our constitutive interdependence. It is because that which is of “decisive importance” in the other’s life will—to some

degree, in some way—be determined by their relation to me that I must use insight, imagination and understanding to judge how to best to serve their interests. What is particularly salient for the purposes of this discussion is the way in which Løgstrup emphasises the way that we shape each other's world not just through conscious action, but through attitude. For example, he writes:

By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another's world. By our attitude to the other person we help to determine the scope and hue of his or her world; we make it large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure. We help to shape his or her world not by theories and views but by our very attitude toward him or her. Herein lies the unarticulated and one might say anonymous demand that we take care of the life which trust has placed in our hands.²⁸

So for Løgstrup, responsibility emerges from the existential porousness that characterises human life: before and beyond any conscious attempts, we shape each other's worlds; we shape each other's worlds even by our own way of thinking about the world. In what follows I want to explore how the notion of “joint attention” might help to shed some light on one aspect of this interdependence; the way in which our own capacity for attention always has something to do with others.

The term ‘joint attention’ refers to the incredibly sophisticated yet mundane capacity, developed from around 9-12 months onwards in most humans, to be aware of another's awareness of the object of one's own awareness.²⁹ Infant pointing is now understood by many developmental psychologists to be an attempt to initiate periods of joint attention with an adult: not just to direct the adult's attention to some object, but to have their own interest in an object pointed at recognised and shared. Much of this research has been linked with an increased understanding of autism, and autism is now considered by some to be closely related to difficulties in the development of the capacity to respond to and initiate bids for joint attention.³⁰ When it comes to a precise conceptual articulation of the “jointness” or “openness” in joint attention, there are considerable philosophical difficulties lurking, but I will risk using two summaries from the literature to introduce the concept. According to Naomi Elia, joint attention refers to the capacity to form triangles of attention:

Each subject is aware, in some sense, of the object as an object that is present to both subjects. There is, in this respect, a “meeting of minds” between both subjects, such that the fact that both are attending to the same object is open or mutually manifest.³¹

As Elian points out, there is something “utterly simple and basic” about the transparency involved here, something that philosophical accounts of “common knowledge” that rely on an appeal to beliefs about what the other is aware of miss.³² In a similar way, John Campbell highlights the way that in episodes of joint attention the “jointness” is not something added on, but is integral to the experience as such:

Just as the object you see can be a constituent of your experience, so too it can be a constituent of your experience that the other person is, with you, jointly attending to the object. [. . .] when there is another person with whom you are jointly attending to the thing, the existence of that other person enters into the individuation of your experience. The other person is there, as co-attender, in the periphery of your experience.³³

Whilst the formulation “joint attention” has emerged from very recent research in specific disciplinary contexts, it seems to be a notion that most people would intuitively recognise as a part of their daily interactions with others, and is not necessarily restricted to shared attention to immediate objects of sensory perception. For example: two parents watching their child’s first steps together might each experience the other’s excitement in such a way that this shapes their own experience;³⁴ two strangers might subtly acknowledge each other’s presence in a public place;³⁵ one might feel irritation when a friend keeps checking their phone whilst one is speaking to them, as one feels one’s own attention drawn, with theirs, towards the phone, and so on. All of these may testify to the way that joint attention is basic to our social lives. However difficult it may be to articulate philosophically the “openness” that characterises joint attention, it appears to be a basic constituent of many of the most important social experiences.

For the purposes of this discussion, the most important aspect is the way in which joint attention involves shared orientation to the object of attention. Drawing on research on infant pointing, Malinda Carpenter and Kristin Liebal emphasise the way in which infant pointing seems to be a bid to direct attention to an object *and* to share interest in that object.³⁶ To fully attend with the infant is only possible if the adult is willing to demonstrate not just that they, too, can see whatever it is, but that they, too can share an interest—fascination, surprise, etc.—in it. It is this aspect of joint attention that I want to focus on here, and a couple of brief examples will, hopefully draw out more clearly the point here.

Suppose I am in a jazz bar listening intently to a trumpet solo with my brother, a keen jazz musician. During the solo, as a result of incomprehensible intuitive improvisational

dynamics, the drummer, pianist and trumpeter join in one particularly memorable moment of spontaneity. I turn to look at my brother, who sensing me looking at him, turns to me, grins, raises his eyebrows and nods. We both turn back to the stage again, clapping. In this case, I am tempted to say that the sense of sharing attention conditions my experience of the memorable moment in the first place: would I have noticed that moment had I been with someone else, or alone? It is, in part, my brother's love of jazz, and my awareness of his expertise that heightens my awareness in the first place. But suppose that, when I turn to my brother to see his reaction, he is idly stirring his drink, staring at the table, and does not catch my eye, then although we may be both hearing the same music at the same time, we are not jointly attending to it, and I would not feel like I had shared the experience. Similarly, if, at some kind serious formal occasion—let's say a funeral—the speaker says something unintentionally hilarious, I may briefly catch a particular friend's eye, and recognise immediately that they share the joke by observing almost imperceptible facial changes. I might well then spend the rest of the occasion *avoiding* their gaze, because somehow the humour of the comment is amplified when we consider it together; indeed, if this particular friend wasn't present, perhaps there would be no danger at all of potentially disruptive laughter. The key thing in both examples is not just the shared experience of an event, but the shared attitude towards it, the awareness of sharing an attitude towards it, and the way that acknowledgement of this sharing seems to amplify the sharedness - to make it more "open", and to add a texture that would be otherwise lacking.

Joint Attention and Compassion

The intuition that drives this paper is that very often when I experience compassion from another it is in the form of shared, or joint, attention. Since very often one suffers through the thought of that which oppresses, it seems to be true that if there is to be any "suffering-with", then it must involve a shared awareness of that which oppresses. The easiest way to show how I think this might be the case is through a series of relatively mundane examples, which are a fictional composite of a number of real episodes.

Suppose I am unemployed and have, after a long series of unsuccessful attempts, failed once again to get an interview for a job. The job in question had seemed like a perfect fit for me; not only did it involve working for an organisation whose work I value, it required skills that I believe I possess, and would have utilised experience I know I have. It was also fairly well-paid,

which would have helped considerably with on-going money problems I have been having, and near to my home, which would make family life easier. I did the best job of the application form I know how to. I know that jobs like this come around once every few years, and that I am very, very unlikely to have another chance to apply for a similar position in the near future. Not long after I find out that I have not been invited to interview, a close friend calls round and asks me how I am. I explain what has happened. My friend looks at me, and expresses something to the effect that he is really sorry, ‘that must be so frustrating’, etc. My friend, as it happens, has a job that he enjoys, in a similar line of work. I talk at some length at how good this job would have been, how I can’t understand how I could not have been given an interview, and how rare these jobs are, and finish by saying something like ‘that was my one chance’. My friend pauses, and then says “well, you never know what’s round the corner.” As I hear these words, I feel a jolt of something that is very difficult to put into words, a kind of internal flinching. I reply with something non-committal, like “yeah, I suppose.” The conversation is slightly awkward from then on, and I do my best to change the topic.

What happens in this instance? Perhaps it is something like this: the problem is not that my friend has not paid attention to *me*, or to my situation; the problem is that I do not feel as though they have been *with me* in attending *to* the situation. That is, I feel that we have both been considering the same set of facts, the same circumstances, but not in the same way; we have not been together in our consideration of the facts of the matter. There could be many explanations, in turn, for this failure: perhaps my friend is unwilling to accept just how unfair life can be, and how her own very-fortunate job situation is just the luck of the draw, rather than the result of any cosmic hand of justice, or the natural fruit of her own abilities; perhaps my friend simply does not quite see how frustrating my situation is, through lack of similar experience of her own. Perhaps, on the contrary it is because I am exaggerating the futility of my situation as a result of self-pity, and my friend is not willing to be complicit in this; perhaps my reactions to her attempted consolation are tinged with envy. Either way, the point is that what is missing is the sense of someone paying attention not just to me, but to the situation to which I am attending, in the way that I am attending to it. But it is the *way* in which I think about the situation which oppresses me, not simply the fact of not having a job.

Let us change the scenario slightly. This time, after two weeks of not hearing anything about the job in question, I phone the organisation to ask if invites to interview have been sent

out, and am subsequently told that my application was not received, due to an error in their computer system. The error was only discovered after the interviews had taken place, when they suddenly received a batch of old emails, including several applications. They are very sorry, but there is nothing they can do about this. Later that day, a close friend asks me about the job. I explain, briefly and angrily what has happened. I hear concern in her voice, and see in her face that the senselessness of the situation is dawning on them. But I dismiss the conversation, with some kind of comment that conveys bitter light-heartedness. I then change the subject very quickly. I am still unsettled when my friend leaves, and feel like the encounter has tired me out a little. Here it would seem that I refuse the opportunity to allow another to contemplate a situation with me, and to share my frustration. Why is this? Perhaps it is that I do not trust this person enough to allow them this intimacy, but perhaps it is also because I do not wish to contemplate it myself. To see the stupidity of the situation in the face of another person would be an invitation to face it myself, and I am unwilling to do this. It is as though my friend's frustration at the mistake, and their concern for me would make it more real.

Finally, let us say that the friend works part-time in a job which is tolerable, but not ideal, and has two children, the youngest of which has recently been diagnosed with a cancerous tumour on her leg at the age of three, and has been undergoing chemotherapy. I bump into my friend whilst walking in the park: I am there to try to lift my depressed mood; she is out with her youngest child. She asks how I am, and I briefly explain, looking down and largely avoiding her gaze. When I finish, my friend grimaces slightly, nods, and says "that's rough". She does not have to make it clear to me that she sees how frustrating the situation is (I do not reflect on this at the time, but for some reason, I sense that intuitively). After replying with a brief agreement, I look over at her three year-old daughter, who is engrossed by a nearby tree stump, which she is, with some effort, climbing on and then jumping off. We are silent for a short while, then I say: "she's pretty great, isn't she?" My friend smiles. We watch silently for a short while. Then my friend looks back at me, and says "you'll be ok, you know." I nod, and reply: "I know. Thanks." There is another pause, filled with the sound of my friend's daughter talking to herself, and then we leave each other. I go home feeling lighter and calmer, although still frustrated.

If this final example can be taken as a case of shared attention in the form of compassion, then it is not straightforwardly something that I receive *from* her, even though she is certainly both generous and attentive; it seems, rather, to be something that arises between us. The

conditions of this arising depend to a large degree on my instinctive assessment of my friend's character, her attitude towards her own problems, as well as to me. I sense intuitively that my friend has the capacity, or preparedness, to contemplate the difficulty of my situation with me; this means she does not have to make any effort to make this clear, or draw any attention to her own empathy. She does not, then, ask me to attend to or notice her own kindness. Strangely, however, the simple fact that I sense that someone else has attended to the problem that I am concerned with, in the *way* that I am concerned with it, alters the significance that the situation has for me. Why is this? The situation remains the same, and for the sake of argument, let us say that my pessimistic assessment of the situation is pretty accurate. But my way of attending to the situation has been changed, somehow. I am no more optimistic than I was, and my pessimism has not been reduced, but it is as though it now occupies less space in my psyche. There is something paradoxical here, I think: my friend's attention to and with me changes my experience only because she does not try to change it, but enters into it as it is; the willingness to accept my reaction to the situation as it is means that I no longer react to it in the same way. She does not force her hope on to me as a consolation that should drive away my initial reaction, but because we are attending jointly (to my troubles, to her daughter), her own hope, in the face of her own fears—which are deeper, and more serious—affects me, and it bleeds into my own. Of course, in this scenario part of the reason for this is that we also share attention in another way: to her daughter, her daughter's contentment in the middle of difficulty, her simplicity (in fact, we attend together to the way that her daughter is, in turn, happily and effortlessly engrossed by the world outside her). In sharing my friend's love, enjoyment and deep concern for her daughter, I am somehow enabled to react differently to my own circumstances.

It is important to point out a danger here. Many of Weil's comments about the nature of compassion are written in relation to extreme suffering; to "affliction". She leaves hints in the notebooks about how she conceived of the relationship between the "supernatural compassion" that responds to affliction and the "natural pity" with which people quite ordinarily respond to more mundane suffering, but these are not developed enough to draw firm conclusions from.³⁷ The examples above concern relatively trivial difficulty, and are as far as they could be from the extreme degradation that Weil tried to grapple with. It might be argued, then, that what I have to say here simply has no bearing on Weil's understanding of compassion, and as she affirms a qualitative difference between "suffering" and "affliction", one would expect a clear difference

in the kind of attention at work in compassionate responses to each. However, Weil is very clear that there is a single disposition to, or faculty of, attention; whether it orients us toward beauty, truth, solutions to practical problems and the needs of others, it is the same basic “posture”. This precisely why, as she famously writes, every school exercise, when undertaken with the right quality of attention, is “like a sacrament”: attention to a simple geometry problem can help to cultivate the kind of attention that will one day be turned to the bleeding body at the side of the road. Even if the break between suffering and affliction *is* thought to be consistently maintained in her work (and there are good reasons to think that this is not the case),³⁸ wherever attention operates, it will have the same quality of suspended, patient openness, and will ultimately rely on the same kind of renunciation. Similarly, although there is a certain point beyond which suffering begins to destroy the personality, and so becomes almost impossibly difficult to dwell upon, Weil very clearly thought that the human *resistance* to such attention was all of a piece; it is resistance to “the knowledge that kills”.³⁹ So if the episodes above do give rise to any insights about the nature of attention in these relatively mundane situations, then there are good Weilian reasons to think that we might be able to at least try to apply them elsewhere.

Consolation and Creative Attention

As I have already attempted to show, there is an aspect of attentive compassion which appears to be only faintly visible in Weil’s account, namely, the “attending-with” outlined above. It should also be clear from the third episode above that I am trying to suggest that the experience of such shared attention may be deeply consoling in some way. And so there is a further point to be made here, which has a bearing on the way that Weil discusses “consolation”. As already indicated, Weil’s understanding of the great difficulty of attention, and of the pervasive hold of “imagination” is organically related to her frequent expressions of suspicion towards consolation in various forms (“consolations are manufactured by the imagination”).⁴⁰ On the whole, “consolation” is the term that Weil gives to the products of the compensatory operation of the imagination, which always searches for balance (“the search for balance is bad because imaginary”).⁴¹ And the cultivation of attention goes hand in hand with the refusal to entertain such consolation:

“We should set aside the beliefs which fill up voids, soften bitteresses. The belief in immortality. The belief in the usefulness of sins: ‘etiam peccata’. [What is useful is that they should be made manifest.] The belief in the providential ordering of events.

(In short, the ‘consolations’ which are often sought in religion).”

It seems fairly clear that at this point, and in similar passages, Weil has in mind here primarily the solitary realm (the self-absorbed day-dream; the desperate scramble for a reassuring thought) or, less often the “collective” realm (the illusions that are produced through agreement, the superstitious repetition of religious dogmas). Consolations are those thoughts that are *produced* by the refusal of imbalance, or “void”, and so by their very nature distance us from reality. But what of the consoling word that the compassionate person may want to offer? Does compassion not aim at consolation, and if not, what is its end?

In another well-known passage from “Forms of the Implicit Love of God”, Weil describes the moment of compassionate attention by calling to mind the image of the beaten man by the side of the road, from the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Those who pass by this thing scarcely notice it, and a few minutes afterwards do not even know that they saw it. Only one stops and turns his attention towards it. The actions that follow are just the automatic effect of this moment of attention. The attention is creative. But at the moment when it is engaged it is renunciation. This is true, at least, if it is pure. The man accepts being diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him.⁴²

As already noted, the idea that real attention involves renunciation is one of the most striking themes in Weil’s work. Similarly, the idea that attention determines action is also found throughout, in discussions of creativity as well as human interactions. In one place, for example Weil notes that “a poem is beautiful to the precise degree in which the attention, whilst it was being composed, has been turned toward the inexpressible.”⁴³ However, the idea that attention itself is *creative* is not so familiar, and those who have read more of Weil’s work may feel that this represents a slight, but significant change in her understanding of attention – if not in content then certainly in emphasis.⁴⁴

On the whole, the impression is that attention waits, turns, desires, opens; but without changing anything except the one who attends. It is active insofar as it involves a kind of

consent, but to consent to pay attention is consent to encounter reality as it is, to allow oneself to be “penetrated” by things as they are in themselves, as she puts it in her essay on school studies.⁴⁵ However, in this passage Weil continues: “[c]reative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying by the road-side.”⁴⁶ So in the moment that Weil is describing here, it is as though the attention that compassion consists in somehow precedes its own object, and—perhaps as a result of this—it gives something. Weil’s account of how and why this attention can only be “creative” draws quite unsystematically upon a number of different ideas and images, and the train of thought is not perfectly clear. One theme that runs through the discussion is essentially an interpretation of the parable of the sheep and the goats, which aims to show how love of neighbour is one of the ways in which God is “really though secretly present”.⁴⁷ There is not space here to give a full account of this train of thought, but what we can note is that as we have already seen, Weil very quickly abstracts from the reflections on texture of inter-personal encounter to a much more abstract level of discourse, so that the focus is no longer on what goes on between the two characters, but on what goes on within each of them, or—which is the same—between each of them and God.

The other central theme in this section concerns justice, compassion and dignity. She begins by noting that all-too-often acts of generosity end up producing a “servile” gratitude in the recipient, and self-satisfaction or a sense of power in the benefactor.⁴⁸ The true miracle of justice or love (the terms are intentionally conflated here) is that compassion becomes compatible with respect. As she later writes: “The supernatural virtue of justice consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship.”⁴⁹ This non-condescension opposes a powerful tendency; on the whole, people give to those in need as if they were buying an object, with the aim of either no longer being obliged to think of them, or (worse) for the pleasure of feeling the distance between them and oneself.⁵⁰ The notion of creativity enters the picture because of this non-condescension: “[h]e who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings, of which fate had deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them.”⁵¹ For Weil, the creation action of God can only be understood as renunciation—“voluntary effacement”—because it involves a willingness *not* to command everywhere possible, and to accept diminution (because, for Weil,

“God and all his creatures are less than God alone”).⁵² The person whose attention rests willingly on the afflicted must accept and affirm a similar diminution, and one who has accepted such self-denial has begun to be decreated, so as to allow God to love the world through her. Finally, then, Weil writes that the being who has been “reduced” by affliction receives a “soul borne of charity” as they receive the generous compassion of others: “to treat our neighbour who is in affliction with love is something like baptising him”.⁵³ And her account of what this new birth consists in is developed along the same lines as her account of the decreation involved in compassion: the grateful recipient of compassion is enabled to love themselves in truth; they love themselves as a wretched finite being, totally exposed to necessity. The attention is “creative,” then, insofar as it allows the other to love themselves in truth, and to resist the impulse to despise the affliction to which they are subject, which is also their own inner possibility.

So here again, Weil articulates the significance of this “supernatural gratitude” by immediately framing the capacity for such gratitude as in terms of an attitude towards reality as such: it means to consent to the reality which allows the suffering to which one is subject.⁵⁴ And in doing so one affirms the whole of reality; it means that one judges the creation to be good.⁵⁵ In other words, the account is given in terms of a relation between the individual sufferer and the world/God, not in terms of a relation between two individuals. For both the compassionate and the grateful, what is really of significance is the way in which such experiences depend upon and encourage an attitude towards God/reality, which is why she can write, in the New York notebook: “Praise to God and compassion for creatures. It is the same movement of the heart.”⁵⁶ Weil gives an extensive phenomenological account of the resistance to paying attention to suffering and the difficulty of compassion, of the spiritual trajectory necessary for such compassion, and sketches of the metaphysical structure which would accommodate these insights. But she does not seem to give a particularly textured account of what it is like to receive compassion, or of the relations involved in such an encounter. Andrea Hollingsworth’s more detailed discussion of the ideas briefly introduced above claims that Weil gives an account of the absent-presence of God in “relational spaces of shared suffering”.⁵⁷ But we need to ask whether Weil’s account gives a rich enough account of the “sharedness” of these spaces. It is perhaps telling that in the key example (the parable of the Good Samaritan) the giving and the receiving—the attender and attendee—are very cleanly separated, because the suffering participant is unconscious. Job, on the contrary, will not stop speaking, which means that any

compassion he receives will be given by someone who has the—perhaps more subtle—capacity to *enter into* his questioning in the right way. If we are to give an account of what attentive compassion looks like in the latter case, we will, I believe, need one that includes the capacity to share, not just to give, attention.

Conclusion

Weil's account of compassion has been developed in a particularly fruitful way by Raimond Gaita, and Gaita's discussion will help to summarise what I believe is suggested, but ultimately not affirmed, in Weil's writing on this subject, and how this may relate to the notion of a "creative attention". Like Weil, Gaita is unsatisfied with any attempt to account for compassion simply in terms of an emotional addition to a prior cognitive recognition; instead the affective aspect of compassion must be considered as itself a form of recognition: "[i]t is an ethically necessitated responsiveness to the perception of what it meant for [someone] to suffer as they did."⁵⁸ As part of his discussion, Gaita reflects on two episodes from his own life that have proved to be central to his own understanding of these matters, both of which concern attitudes towards, and treatment of, people suffering from serious mental health problems. The first centres on his encounter with a nun who, like Gaita, volunteered at a mental health institution in the 1960's (originally recounted in his book *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*); the second concerns his father, who was friends with a man—Vacek—who was "visibly insane," and who lived between two boulders near their house when Gaita was a boy (originally recounted in the autobiographical book *Romulus, My Father*). He writes:

After I had written *Romulus, My Father*, a journalist asked me whether Vacek had seemed 'weird' to me when I was a boy. Without hesitation I answered sincerely that he had not. Later, my answer puzzled me. Why had he not? Objectively, after all, he was very strange. The answer that came to me was that my father and Hora behaved towards Vacek without condescension. Had they condescended to him – had it shown in their tone of voice or demeanour, in their body language as we say – the cruel sensitivity children often possess would have made me conclude that Vacek was not entirely 'one of us'. As it was, the contrary was true. That was not because I was particularly virtuous. It was because I saw Vacek in the light of my father's and Hora's behaviour towards him, which only later did I realize was something to wonder at.⁵⁹

What we seem to have here is an example of how the sharing of attention might be creative: his father's mode of responsiveness to Vacek is intuitively shared by Gaita, so that Gaita's own attention was decisively oriented and shaped by his father's.

Similarly, we might then have an alternative way to construe the phrase "creative attention," as well as a way to conceive of the relationship between compassion and consolation. Where it has not passed through any genuine attention to suffering, the consoling word or gesture may well be evasion, or wishful thinking; a dishonest and frightened optimism. But on the other hand, if there can be genuinely shared attention in the midst of suffering, then perhaps consolation may be found as a mysterious product of solidarity. Such consolation is not straightforwardly given, and if it is received, it is received somewhat mysteriously from a source that cannot be precisely located.

1 Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction" in *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Crauford (London: HarperCollins, 1977), 62. See also "Human Personality" in *Selected Essays, 1934-1943*, 23 for an almost identical formulation.

2 Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies" in *Waiting on God*, 58

3 See Simone Weil, "Notes on the Concept of Character" in *Late Philosophical Writings*, ed. Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), esp. 98-100. This theme is also found in the notebooks; see for example *Notebooks*, 288-9 (in relation to the failure of 'natural' compassion) and 436, in relation to contemplation and action.

4 For examples of this motif, see Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 149, 227, 261 and 425.

5 See, e.g. Weil, *Notebooks*, 153-4, 156 and "Some Thoughts on the Love of God" in *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 148.

6 See her profound comments in “The Power of Words” on the effect that ever-increasing sacrifices of war produce a kind of “murderous absurdity”, through which a goal is imagined in proportion to the costs already paid, as in the case of the Greek-Trojan war: “Its importance was simply imagined as corresponding to the to the deaths already incurred and the further massacres expected; and this implied an importance beyond all reckoning.” Weil, *Selected Essays*, 155.

7 Simone Weil, “The ‘Iliad’, Poem of Might” in *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, trans. E. C. Geissbuhler (London: Routledge, 1998), 53.

8 See Joel Krueger, “Merleau-Ponty on Shared Emotions and the Joint Ownership Thesis” in *Continental Philosophy Review* 46 (2013).

9 See, for example, Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dargon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), ch. 2; Sharon Cameron, “The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil’s Performance of Impersonality” in *Critical Inquiry* 29: 2 (2003); Andrea Hollingsworth, “Simone Weil and the Theo-Poetics of Compassion” in *Modern Theology* 29: 3 (2013).

10 See, e.g. Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction” in *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 175. The reference here is to the second half of the essay, as only the first half of this long essay is collected in the much more easily-accessible *Waiting on God*. References to this essay will be for *Waiting on God*, for ease of reference, unless specified otherwise.

11 See, e.g. Weil, *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 148-152.

12 See, e.g. *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, 31-2.

13 Despite her sensitivity to the unique ways in which industrialised, capitalist societies produce distinct forms of oppression, there is a clear tendency in Weil’s reflections on affliction to de-politicise it, so that even if a particular case of dehumanising suffering is caused by historically and politically contingent circumstances, it is nevertheless seen as revealing some a-historical truth. This is turn is because Weil saw political and social forces as quasi-natural forces. Though this tendency is problematic in its own right, it will not be explored here.

14 Weil, *Selected Essays*, 27. See *First and Last Notebooks*, 326-7 for a parallel discussion.

15 The first chapter of Lissa McCullough’s *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (London : I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014) provides a useful introduction to Weil’s understanding of the term “reality”.

16 The essay “Morality and Literature” in *Science, Necessity and the Love of God* is particularly instructive on the question of imagination. See also the fascinating entry in *Notebooks*, 365-66 for an insight into Weil’s way of using the term “reality”: attachment is incompatible with genuine belief in the reality of things (whereas joy is “the fullness of the sentiment of the real” (222).

17 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, 60.

18 *Ibid.*, 60.

19 *Ibid.*, 61.

20 Weil, *Selected Essays*, p. 30. See also 10, 12 & 24 for references to this “surprised cry”.

21 See *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 185-6; 193-4 on this point. Like Nietzsche, Weil presumes that in some sense any complaint against a particular instance of suffering will at the same time be a complaint against the whole order of things. For both Nietzsche and Weil, a non-evasive encounter with our own existence produces horror, but through and beyond this horror lies the possibility of a form of (for Nietzsche) affirmation or (for Weil) love, and such affirmation/love transfigures the real.

22 See e.g. A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone, “Simone Weil and the Ethic of (Im)moderation” in *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 25.

23 See, e.g. Weil, *Notebooks*, 297; 615.

24 Weil, *Selected Essays*, 14.

25 See “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations” in *Selected Essays*, 219-20; and the parallel entry in *First and Last Notebooks*, 282-285.

26 See *Notebooks*, 292.

27 Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, trans. Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 5.

28 Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 18. See also 26, 59 for related comments, and “Humanism and Christianity,” trans. Robert Stern,

<https://ethicaldemand.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/logstrup-humanism-and-christianity-translation.pdf> (n.p.; opening paragraph).

29 See Naomi Elian, “Joint Attention, Communication and Mind” in *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. Naomi Elian et. al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 4-5.

30 See Juan-Carlos Gomez, “Joint Attention and the Notion of Subject: Insights from Apes, Normal Children and Children with Autism” in *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. Naomi Elian et. al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 65-84.

31 Elian, “Joint Attention, Communication and Mind,” 5.

32 Elian, “Joint Attention, Communication and Mind,” 2-3. See Christopher Peacocke, “Joint Attention: Its Nature, Reflexivity and Relation to Common Knowledge”, 299-309 of the same volume for more on this issue.

33 John Campbell, “Joint Attention and Common Knowledge” in *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology*, 288.

34 See Peacocke, “Joint Attention: Its Nature, Reflexivity and Relation to Common Knowledge,” 208.

35 See Margaret Gilbert, *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 329.

36 Malinda Carpenter and Kristin Liebal, “Joint Attention, Communication and Knowing Together in Infancy” in *Joint Attention: New Developments in Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, and Social Neuroscience*, ed. Axel Seeman (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), esp. 162-163.

37 See, e.g. Weil, *Notebooks*, 288-9; *First and Last Notebooks*, 326-8.

38 Ultimately, Weil seems to see even the most severe and degrading “affliction” as the inner truth of all experiences of subjection to necessity, time and finitude. Despite introducing the distinction in “The Love of God and Affliction,” it does not seem to have governed her thought decisively, as much of what she writes about generic “suffering” in the notebooks is similar to what she writes about “affliction” in this essay.

39 Weil, *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 158.

40 Weil, *Notebooks*, 227.

41 *Ibid.*, 140. Having said this, Weil also uses the term to describe an authentic encounter with God, in terms of consolation at a different “level”. This is a frequent and intriguing move in her work, and is too complicated to be treated effectively here.

42 Weil, *Waiting on God*, 83-4.

43 Weil, *Notebooks*, 412. See also “God in Plato” in *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 133.

44 So far as I am aware, the only other occasion on which Weil explicitly links attention with creativity (though not with the phrase “creative attention”) occurs in the second volume of the Marseilles notebooks, where it seems to be a reference to artistic genius; creative genius emerges from “extreme attention”. See *Notebooks*, 449.

45 Weil, *Waiting on God*, 58. See also her “God in Plato” in *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*.

46 Weil, *Waiting on God*, 85.

47 See Andrea Hollingsworth, “Theo-Poetics of Compassion” esp. 212-221 for a more detailed analysis of the thought contained in this piece of writing.

48 Weil, *Waiting on God*, 78.

49 *Ibid.*, 81.

50 *Ibid.*, 84 and *First and Last Notebooks*, 327.

51 Weil, *Waiting on God*, 81.

52 *Ibid.*, 82-3.

53 *Ibid.*, 83.

54 *Ibid.*, 84-5

55 See Weil, *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 193.

56 Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 102.

57 Hollingsworth, “Theo-Poetics of Compassion”, 223. See also 204, 210 and 221 for similar phrases.

58 Raimond Gaita, “Metaphysics, Morality and Religion” in *Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs: Essays in Moral and Religious Philosophy*, ed. Joseph Carlisle, James Carter and Daniel Whistler (New York: Continuum, 2011), 11.

59 Gaita, “Metaphysics, Morality and Religion”, 6.

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