KRITIKE VOLUME EIGHTEEN NUMBER FOUR (FEBRUARY 2025) 96–108

Article

Simone Weil on Living in an Afflicted World

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Abstract: The contemporary time is being plagued with so many problems that seems to transcend the limits of the human psyche. News of war, suffering, and death seem to abound, and it looks like it will stay with us for a long time. But the question that we could ask: is this something new? Pain, suffering, and despair has been an intrinsic part of the human condition. It transcends every aspect of human existence, that we learn to live in an afflicted world—albeit in a way that becomes unnatural to us. Simone Weil was not a stranger when it comes to affliction—she wrote about it, and she lived with it until she died. She argued that affliction allows us to find meaning, resilience, and hope amidst all the suffering. I argue in this paper that Weil's philosophy is a recognition that suffering as inherent in human existence should not be taken as a negative outlook on life or what I call fetishism of suffering; that it is not a cause of despair but is a call for an ethical engagement which emphasizes the importance of empathy and active involvement in alleviating the affliction, not just for the self, but for others too.

Keywords: Weil, affliction, attention, empathy

The present world—with the ever-developing technologies—is littered with many struggles, or dare I say, suffering. Although it is safe to assume that human life is never devoid of suffering, it is much evident that the kind of suffering today is much worse. It shows that as humans progresses, our desires become more complex, and thus leading to increased suffering. With the development and flourishing of nations, their desires and their want to be powerful become roots of the worsening affliction of the world. We can see it in the presence of war in Europe, the maritime tension among Asian nations, and of course the localized suffering brought about by many factors such as the worldwide inflation. Because of this, we can see people becoming desensitized and detached about this reality. People are divided into those who try to escape suffering and those who embrace it without really understanding the point of it—I call this *fetishism of suffering*.

https://doi.org/10.25138/18.4.a4
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2025b/eugenio_february2025.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

Most often, people think of Simone Weil's concept of affliction as embracing this suffering fetishism, but I will argue that her acceptance of affliction is not a blind embracing of it, but really a starting point of attaining what we could call an attentive and empathic coexistence in this world. In the first part, I discuss the different dimensions of affliction and how it affects our lives. The second part is a discussion on cultivating attention. In this part, I argue that in the midst of the overwhelming presence of affliction, we need to have a strong commitment for attentive coexistence. This will be continued onto the next part as I discuss attention's maximum expression, which is love. I take love to mean empathy towards others which is essential to make sense of affliction and to lead us to a deeper sense of existence.

Affliction: The Void of the Soul

Simone Weil acknowledges the importance of struggle in the development of the human person, as most existentialists do. The French term *malheur*, with affliction as the closest English translation, encapsulates her notion of despair. Affliction in the general sense of the term is about suffering—but this is not the kind of suffering that is commonly known—for it transcends physical and emotional pain. Affliction goes beyond physical pain, but it is inseparable from it. Weil maintains that it is distinct from simple suffering for it "takes possession of the soul and marks it through with its particular mark—the mark of slavery."[1] When she speaks of slavery, she refers to the ancient Roman slavery, which is persisting until today in much complex forms, such as being slaves of money and of ideologies. Weil argues that all forms of slavery are inseparable from physical pain and suffering. She maintains that "affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less weakened equivalent of death."[2] It affects the whole life of a person in an indefinite period of time; it is unlike having migraine which passes after days or weeks, since we have no knowledge of how to cure affliction immediately. Unlike physical illnesses which we can bring to physicians for cure, affliction can pass us without noticing it. That the moment we understand that we have it, we have already become too entangled in it, that it feels impossible to get out of it alone, making us despair even more.

But what causes affliction? Where do we get this severe pain that marks our soul? Weil argues that though affliction is spiritual in nature, it is very much influenced by the social factors of existence. As she writes, "there is no true affliction unless every facet of human life is attacked: physical,

[1] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 67.

[2] *Ibid*.

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https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2025b/eugenio_february2025.pdf
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social, and psychological."[3] And she puts great emphasis on the essentiality of the social factor, as she writes: "there is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another."[4] This is how affliction has become and it can be deduced that it has three dimensions: (1) social degradation or ostracism; (2) psychological torture wherein one sees herself as worthless; and (3) physical pain.[5]

In the first dimension, social degradation comes in many forms but oppression in terms of slavery and colonization best exemplify it. In discussing her concept of oppression, it is important to honor her Marxist influence. Indeed Karl Marx introduced Weil to the idea of oppression, but she makes a striking critique of Marx's notion, pointing out that his is too limited between the social classes i.e., between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.[6] This oversight of the diverse types of oppression in Marx and his followers allows the communist to exploit and to get away from their oppressive ways which they argue is not oppression in the Marxist perspective.[7] This is where she tries to fill the gap on the general theory of oppression. She maintains that the notion of oppression transcends the field of economics and capitalism but it covers the whole civilization, "for it is oppression that has produced Hitler, wars, genocide, and many other social ills."[8] This is evident in our civilization which is embedded with many kinds of oppressive forces which take matters in their own hands, and our history is littered with accounts of oppression—in all forms of it, such as social, political, and religious. And to say that this is a thing of the past is presumptuous, as we continuously experience it in the present day. For example, the racism that is prevalent not just in the West but also in many countries against other races or even nationalities in some cases; the sexism evident in our society; and the religious extremism against one another that is rampant all over the world.

The main thrust of Weil's discussion on oppression is slavery. She maintains that from the dawn of civilization, human beings are already slaves. At the very moment of existence, one is already a slave of her desires. All her actions are motivated by the needs that she has.[9] The primitive people hunt and live according to the dictates of their biological needs such as food

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[3] *Ibid.*, 68.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Henry Leroy Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, ed. by Martin Andic (New York: Continuum, 2001), 63.

[6] Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* trans. by Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London: Routledge, 2001), 53.

[7] Finch, *Intellect and Grace,* 63.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 75.

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https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2025b/eugenio_february2025.pdf
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and shelter; and so are the present humans, but we have a more complex need compared to our ancestors. We are now motivated by money, by prestige.

The second aspect of affliction soon follows. After experiencing social degradation or ostracism, psychological torture follows. If we will take the case of the laborers in Marx, they feel this torture in a way that they will always equate their worth with their product. That due to this social degradation people will always feel as if they are worthless or that their worth is dependent upon certain variables and not innate as it should be. Weil has experienced this at a young age, having felt as if she is less worthy compared to her genius brother, as evident in one of her letters to Fr. Perrin.[10] The idea of being outside the kingdom of truth has given her an immense feeling of anxiety. But take into consideration the feeling of those who are uprooted by slavery, by colonization—these are more intense in nature, in a sense that they have no control over the things surrounding them and they have no power to change the things laid in front of them. "Colonization is the same as capitalism,"[11] they are both oppressive and they uproot people from their niche and produces lasting damage in the psyche of the people. Frantz Fanon describes the idea of the effects of colonialism in the chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* entitled, "Colonial War and Mental Disorder." While he might not be directly influenced by Weil, he embodies the very notion that Weil is foreshadowing in her work. He maintains that "colonial war will go on, and for many years and many more to come, we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people by the colonialist onslaught."[12] He argues that psychological disorders are ever present in any country which has been under a colonial power and this becomes a hindrance in making meaning—for making meaning involves knowing who one really is. He also maintains that colonialism does not only pertain to the systematic domination of people but "a systematized negation of the other, a determined denial of any attribute of humanity to the other; colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question 'who am I in reality?'"[13] This is an unfortunate scenario in any life possible. Simone Weil writes, "a tree whose

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[10] "At fourteen, I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority to me. I did not mind having no visible successes, but what did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides." Weil, *Waiting for God*, 23.

[11] J. P. Little, *Simone Weil on Colonialism* (London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 26.

[12] Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth,* trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 181.

[13] *Ibid*., 182.

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https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2025b/eugenio_february2025.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

roots are almost entirely eaten away falls at the first blow"[14] —she means to give emphasis on human beings' need to give importance to their own nature. To question their real identity is a symptom of the severity of their uprootedness.

The third aspect of affliction is physical pain. The psychological torture of not being good enough soon manifests itself as a physical pain. For example, a chest pain or an intense headache which becomes unbearable. But unlike ordinary physical pain, this cannot be remedied by simple medicine. For instance, Simone Weil has been plagued with intense headache her whole life and she equates it to the void that is in need of filling. This feeling of physical pain is what we may term as suffering and most of the time we have no idea what to do with such suffering that we endure. Some cope with it by extending it to others, as Weil argues that people do it because we think we gain something from it; that every time we do harm to others "we have gained in importance. We have expanded. We have filled an emptiness in ourselves by creating one in somebody else."[15] She maintains that:

> Human mechanics: whoever is suffering seeks to communicate his suffering—either by ill-treating another or by provoking pity—so as to lessen it, and really does lessen it in this way. Where there is somebody who is absolutely inferior, with whom nobody commiserates, who is powerless to ill-treat any, his suffering remains inside him and poisons his existence.[16]

But for those who cannot do such projection, they resort to "attacking what the universe itself represents to them,"[17] which makes them mad at the world for "every good or beautiful thing becomes an insult."[18] Now the question stands: what then is the way to fill the void?

To make sense of suffering is a difficult task, what Weil suggests is for us to have the "strength to contemplate affliction when we are afflicted and to turn to the supernatural bread,"[19] that is for us to turn to God.

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[14] Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, trans. by Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 2002), 45.

[15] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace,* trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

[16] Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil,* trans. by Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 122.

[17] Weil, *Gravity and Grace,* 6.

[18] *Ibid*.

[19] *Ibid*., 7. See Weil, *Notebooks,* 157.

https://doi.org/10.25138/18.4.a4
https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2025b/eugenio_february2025.pdf
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Affliction's supernatural and real cause is God's detachment from us and that left the void that we try so much to fill with our own capacity. This void makes it hard to love in whatever aspect it pertains. In God's absence, there is nothing to love, but when the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes permanent.[20] In His absence, He inflicts us with affliction which becomes the true test of faith and of our soul's capacity to love. It is easy to love when all is good, when there is joy, and our souls are brimming with happiness. But with affliction present, to love is the greatest challenge. How is it possible to love if we feel empty? How is it possible to love if we feel like we are worthless? How do we love if we are under immense pain and suffering?[21]

That is the point of Weil's discussion of affliction—where do we find the capacity to love when we are downtrodden? Central to her argument is that God's love plays an important role in the unfolding of affliction. She argues that affliction is a "manual of Divine technique,"[22] which allows the introduction of the "finite creature's soul to the immensity of force, which is blind, brutal, and cold"[23]—which is humanity's reality.

Cultivating Attention

As long as there are people using force for their mere selfishness oppression, violence, and suffering will always stay. With the presence of affliction everywhere, it is necessary to ask the question: what kind of response does seeing human suffering demand of us? Simone Weil's answer to this is the best yet the most difficult one—attention. She defines attention as the "rarest and purest form of generosity."[24] As true as it is during her time, people tend to focus on themselves that thinking of others becomes a luxury. Whenever we think of the term attention, we always equate it with the word focus. When we attend to someone or something, we focus on them—we become present for them.[25] This is the very core of attention: *being present for the other*. It becomes the rarest and purest form of generosity not because we

[20] Weil, *Waiting for God,* 70 and 79.

[21] Weil, *Notebooks,* 79.

[22] Weil, *Waiting for God,* 81.

[23] *Ibid*. See Eric Springsted, *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 34.

[24] Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters* trans. by Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 136.

[25] Lisa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (London: I.B Tauris, 2014), 70. "The French terms *attente* and *attendre* have all the connotation of 'to wait' in English. But it is also cognate with the term attention which connotes 'to be present' or 'to listen to'." See also, Peta Bowden, "Ethical Attention: Accumulating Understanding," in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6:1 (1998), 60.

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give away tangible things, but because we give others our undivided time and presence. We give a part of ourselves that cannot be paid by money or any worldly matter; we give a part of ourselves that we cannot take back. Her life is a testament of this attentiveness towards others that somehow, she has forgotten to attend to her own needs.[26] This attentiveness helped in strengthening her conviction that self-centeredness will not help us attain the good that we are continuously searching for.

Mario von der Ruhr says that the concept of attention in Weil's philosophy is like Ariadne's thread as it is woven through every aspect of her thoughts.[27] As early as 1933–1934, she included the notion of attention in her lectures at the *lycée*. In the compiled *Lectures on Philosophy*, she discusses and differentiates two types of attention: spontaneous and voluntary attention.[28] She also maintains that these types of attention have their distinct symptoms, both physiological and psychological. Spontaneous attention is related to emotions such as grief and fear, which cannot be controlled, such as when one becomes overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of fear. It is characterized by the suspension of thinking about anything else besides the subject of emotion (psychological) and motionlessness and tension (physiological).[29] While voluntary attention is a higher form of attention, in such a way that one wills to focus on a subject. She relates it to education and prayer. For this kind of attention, the defining characteristics are when one does not allow oneself to think of anything else (psychological) and quietness (physiological).[30]

It is apparent that silence is a common symptom to the two types of attention. Silence should not be taken as the mere absence of sound but as an object of sensation.[31] It is in silence that we become aware of the things around us. It is in silence that we make sense of everything. But as human beings, we have the tendency to fear silence. We tend to think that silence will reveal to us the things that we are so much afraid to know and understand. This is why she emphasizes on attentive silence. She describes this as an important aspect of learning and of understanding the language of God, which she calls justice.

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[26] Adrian Rebecca Rozelle-Stone, "Voiding Distraction: Simone Weil and the Religio-Ethics of Attention," (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2009), 3, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[27] Mario von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* (London: Continuum, 2006), 20.

[28] Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy,* trans. by Hugh Price (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 205.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Weil, *Lectures*, 205.

[31] See Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Sian Miles (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 65.

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https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2025b/eugenio_february2025.pdf
ISSN 1908-7330

She argues that every human being is capable of attention. But the capacity to be attentive seems to easily get lost in the sea of ambition and the prevalence of self-centeredness. This is the reason why she maintains that the cultivation of attention is both a social and moral obligation.[32] It is both a social and moral obligation for it involves treating the others the way they are meant to be treated. We have to become attentive of others in order for us to understand them and for us to give them the support that they need. The moral obligation is not just being there for them when they have no need for us, but precisely by being there when they are at their lowest; when they feel as though they are invisible and do not deserve any attention.

Love as Empathy

Attention in its purest form or maximum form is love, but this love is not the kind that we naturally feel towards our significant others, family members, etc. This love that she speaks of is and should be a supernatural one; one that is rooted in God. Recall the commandment: thou shall love the Lord, thy God which Simone Weil maintains is a commandment not only when one comes to know God but also loving Him in his absence[33] and in our waiting. In His absence, our love must have an object, and that is what she called the different forms of implicit love of God.[34] The different forms of implicit love of God include: the love of our neighbor, the love of the order of the world, and the love of religious practices.

The first form is the love of our neighbor. The very essence of this love is justice. For Weil, justice and love are synonymous terms. To best explain this, she borrows examples from the Greek and Christian traditions.[35] The love of neighbor or justice is essential in our dealing with the afflicted, as it allows for the notion of compassion and gratitude to surface—both on the part of the afflicted and the other.[36] Gratitude drives one to an active faith in God, especially those who are afflicted—as it is hard to be grateful when nothing is going the way you envisioned it to go, and when everything is difficult.[37] She maintains that "gratitude on the part of the unfortunate is but

[32] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God,* 57. See Christopher Hamilton, "Simone Weil's Human Personality: Between the Personal and the Impersonal," in *Harvard Theological Review*, 98:2 (2005), 194.

[33] Weil, *Waiting for God,* 83.

[34] *Ibid*.

[35] *Ibid,* 85. "Christ does not call his benefactors loving or charitable. He calls them just. The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice."

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] Weil, *Notebooks,* 79.

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https://www.kritike.org/journal/special_issue_2025b/eugenio_february2025.pdf
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a participation in the same virtue, for only she who is capable of it can recognize it. It is identical with the real, active faith in God."[38]

This love for our neighbor allows us to see the invisible,[39] pertaining to what the society renders invisible: other's suffering. The modern world has shaped people to be blind towards other people's suffering and makes oneself the center of the universe. There are various factors which contribute to the phenomenon of rendering others' suffering invisible. One prominent factor is the digital age, which has brought about a flood of information and an emphasis on personal online personas. In this digital landscape, it's easy to become engrossed in one's own world, crafting curated online identities that may not accurately represent our real-life empathy and concern for others. We are bombarded with constant distractions, news, and updates, often numbing our sensitivity to the pain and suffering experienced by those around us. Consumerism and materialism further exacerbate this issue. The pursuit of wealth, status, and possessions often leads individuals to prioritize their own desires and comfort above all else. In the relentless pursuit of success, we may inadvertently lose touch with the basic human emotions of empathy and compassion.

Moreover, the modern world's individualistic values and the pressure to constantly improve one's own life can create a tunnel vision where we focus primarily on our own needs, desires, and achievements. The result is a society that, at times, seems to have lost sight of the suffering of others. It is precisely in this context that the idea of loving our neighbor takes on even greater significance. By actively practicing empathy and compassion, we can begin to break down these barriers that isolate us from the suffering of others. She also maintains that people have been misinterpreting the expression "to love our neighbor in God" or "for God," as if we only have to do it because of the fear to offend God and to win His favor. She argues that:

> These expressions are misleading. It is not the time to turn our thoughts in God. Just as there are times when we must think of God, and forget all creatures, we do not think explicitly of God. At such times, the presence of God in us has as its condition a secret so deep that it is even a secret from us.[40]

[38] Weil, *Waiting for God,* 88.
[39] *Ibid*., 92.
[40] *Ibid*., 93.

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To love others just because we want God to reward us is not true love.[41] It is an illusion that does not provide any consolation. What true love looks like is when we consent to God to love the afflicted through us; she maintains "compassion and gratitude come down from God… the sufferer and the other love each other, starting from God, through God, but not for the love of God; they love each other for the love of one for the other."[42] Love for the other is love in itself but through the agency of God.

The second form of implicit love of God is the love of the order of the world. This pertains to the love that we have of the beauty of the universe; "by loving the order of the world we imitate the divine love which created the universe of which we are a part of."[43] Through this form of love, God allows us to have a glimpse of how He created the world; we are not co-creators per se, but by giving us the creative imagination wherein we imagine ourselves like God as a creator of the universe, and just like God, we are expected to renounce this notion of being the center of the universe. She writes:

> We love in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the creator, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of the soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence.[44]

In detaching ourselves from the notion of centrality, we are allowed to truly pay attention to the real beauty of the world. In our present time, when affliction is ever-present; where love seems to fade in the face of war, famine, and travesty, "the beauty of the world is almost the only way we can allow God to penetrate our souls."[45] It is the easiest way for God to open our souls to consent to His presence. But it also allows us to face our greatest trouble—we are always inclined to "eat when we are only supposed to look."[46] In this implicit form of God's love, we are challenged to look and appreciate the world without desiring to possess it. It is through the love for

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[41] *Ibid*., 94. "He who gives bread to the famished sufferer for the love God will not be thanked by Christ. He has already had his reward in this thought itself. Christ thanks those who do not know to whom they are giving food."

[42] *Ibid*., 95.

[43] *Ibid*., 99.

[44] *Ibid*., 100.

[45] *Ibid*., 102.

[46] *Ibid*., 105. See also Ann Pirucello, "Interpreting Simone Weil: Presence and Absence in Attention," in *Philosophy East and West*, 45:1 (January 1995), 61–72; and Michelle Boulous Walker, "Eating Ethically: Emmanuel Levinas and Simone Weil," in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 76:2 (2002), 295–320.

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God's creation that we yearn to know Him more. The love for the order of things allows us to live in the present—loving it means loving the world we are in and not the product of our imagination. Whenever we love the imagined world, "we run the risk of thinking values are easy but easy values are of little merit."[47] An imagined world gives us an imagined value that does not give us any more room to grow. We need real values in order to understand the true love of God.

To love the order of the universe is to love the real. To seek this beauty outside the natural capacity of an individual becomes a vice. We have to exert our attention to the real beauty in order for us to remain true to the very essence of knowing beauty, not just for the immediate gratification of the senses. Since if we fall in the trap of consuming the world, we are forfeiting our responsibilities to the world and become givers of affliction. As she writes:

> Actually, the more they have the form of a nation, the more they claim to be countries themselves, the more distorted and soiled they are as images. But to destroy cities, thrusting them down to the state of social outcasts, this is to sever every bond of poetry and love between human beings and the universe. It is to plunge them forcibly into the horror of ugliness. [48]

The love for the order of things requires us to pay attention to how we interact with the world, as even the smallest improperly thought action could result to irreparable damage to the world and in turn to other people.

Conclusion

Having shown the interrelationship of affliction and attention, it would be safe to say that Weil is not calling for a fetishism of suffering. She is merely telling us that we can, and we have, to make sense of the affliction that we are embracing. It should not be an empty embrace to the point that it does not lead to anything other than itself. Weil's acceptance of affliction is not the end goal, but really a step toward an empathic coexistence in the world—forging relationships with others founded on care and compassion. Her emphasis on attention, especially towards those who are suffering and those who have been deemed unworthy of help, challenges us to re-evaluate

[47] Weil, *Waiting for God,* 114.
[48] Weil, *Waiting for God,* 116–117.

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ISSN 1908-7330

our perspectives, especially in this current time. As we wrestle with affliction, are we still capable of paying attention to others, or have we become too preoccupied by our own affliction that we forget others already?

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ISSN 1908-7330