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## The Growing of Roots in Times of Turmoil and Uncertainty: Simone Weil's Legacy<sup>1</sup>

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Paula Nicole C. Eugenio, M.A.

Department of Philosophy, University of Santo Tomas

**Abstract:** This paper aims to provide an answer to the question: how does one attain authenticity through the lens of Simone Weil's philosophy? It explores the connections among her political, social, and religious ideas, using her notions of affliction through uprootedness and attention to present her philosophy of authentic living. This exposition of Weil's search for authenticity is an exploration of her social and religious thoughts. This is done through a close reading of her works and current contextualization of themes such as affliction brought about by war and other social ills and how attentive living could help us achieve authenticity. Authenticity is found in her concept of the different needs of the soul, specifically, the need for roots. Since this need for roots does not pertain only to the historical sense but also to the spiritual sense, I try to reinforce the idea that one cannot separate her social thought from that of religion.

**Keywords:** Attention, Authenticity, Rootedness

Simone Weil shares with the existentialists the same quest to answer the question *how should we really live?* Her entire life reflects her thoughts, which are in turn informed by her experiences of the world.<sup>2</sup> Her search for authenticity springs from her awareness of the social condition of her time. In her active years, she was deeply interested in the plight of the workers and she tried to integrate herself into their reality.<sup>3</sup> In her years of assimilating herself with the working force and those who are suffering, she was able to see the root cause of our suffering—uprootedness. This is what hinders us to achieve authentic existence. She did not explicitly write about authenticity yet despite this, it can nevertheless be deduced by paying attention to

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<sup>1</sup> This is an excerpt from Paula Nicole C. Eugenio, "Simone Weil's Philosophy of Authentic Living" (Master's Thesis, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, May 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 576.

<sup>3</sup> Mario von der Ruhr, *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention* (London: Continuum, 2006), 64.

her concept of the soul's needs and, most importantly, the need for rootedness. Her book *The Need for Roots* is dedicated to this endeavor to show the essential needs of human beings. Weil shares this undertaking with Eric Fromm, who, in his *The Sane Society*, enumerates five needs of man for true existence. They differ in approach for Fromm employs Psychology while Weil utilizes Philosophy, yet their similarities are hard to miss. Like Weil, Fromm thinks that rootedness is a part of the human condition. He emphasizes the idea of rootedness and outlines the different phases in our history and the type of rootedness experienced in each phase. He maintains that at the beginning, the idea of rootedness pertains to nature until it evolves into its rootedness in solidarity, justice, and truth.<sup>4</sup> This idea of rootedness springs from a historical, social, and religious point of view. It is a rootedness that is formed through a conscious and continuous effort on the part of humanity to live harmoniously in the world, a rootedness which, like Weil's, is always in relation with other human beings as the idea of solidarity always involves the presence of others.

This paper elaborates this central idea of rootedness in two parts: the growing of roots and attentive waiting. The first deals with the historical and spiritual aspects of rootedness, while the second deals with Weil's notion of attention which can be achieved through education and is manifested as love or charity towards others. With these two points, Weil's notion of authenticity is brought to fore.

### Simone Weil and The Need to Grow Roots

Simone Weil emphasizes the need to grow roots or to be rooted. She considers it as "perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the soul, and perhaps the hardest one to define."<sup>5</sup> Her concept of roots can be viewed in two ways: first, as a historical concept; and second, as "that which gives nourishment that enables human to fully grow."<sup>6</sup> With the establishment of the role of roots, the next question to answer is how do we grow roots? The idea of participation is now a concept to consider. She maintains that: "a human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future."<sup>7</sup> The idea of participation is connected to the needs for responsibility and collective property, "as the social life includes community involvement and participation in collective possession and in task of public value."<sup>8</sup> Through socialization or

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<sup>4</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (London: Routledge, 2002), 37-59.

<sup>5</sup> Weil, *Need for Roots*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Heather McRobie, "Should We Still Read Simone Weil," in *The Guardian* (February 3, 2009), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/feb/03/religion-simone-weil>.

<sup>7</sup> Weil, *Need for Roots*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Kruk, a paper presented *The Spiritual Transformation of Social (Justice) Work: A Charter of Social Responsibilities Corresponding to Vital Human Needs*, May 2006.

participation in communal activities, one is already implanting one's roots – as roots start from “attachment bonds and nurturant relationships, such as connectedness to family, neighborhood, and nation.”<sup>9</sup> Thus exemplifying the need for multiple roots, Weil writes: “every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for her to draw well-nigh the whole of her moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which she forms a natural part.”<sup>10</sup> This notion of participation stems from the necessity of being with others, of belonging.

Being a part of a community becomes the first step of rooting oneself. As in a sociological perspective, enculturation starts with socialization. That is also what Weil is trying to convey – our roots begin to take place the moment that we accept that we are part of a community. Yet it is best to qualify Weil's assertion that the need to be a participant in a community does not mean being part of a collective. One of her similarities with existential thinkers like Kierkegaard is her anti-collective stance. For her, being a part of the collective is a “direct insult to human rationality and an impediment on reaching the impersonal.”<sup>11</sup> Participation is a direct contradiction to collectivity since participation involves the impersonal rather than the personal.<sup>12</sup> The impersonal is the denuded “I” which is the “I” that has no pride whatsoever, but an “I” that is waiting attentively for God and others. For Weil, there are two types of rootedness that we should strive to have: historical and spiritual rootedness.

### *The Past as Source of Rootedness*

The widely used metaphor of roots hints at our indebtedness to our past—a historical metaphor. Simone Weil's political and social conception of the notion of roots is about the preservation of one's history. In *The Need for Roots*, she emphasizes the idea that “our history is an essential part of our beings[.]”<sup>13</sup> that it is important for us to give high regard to our history “despite our political attitudes[.]”<sup>14</sup> Our respect towards our culture and tradition allows us to form our identity as an individual and as a nation.

This high regard for history is the very reason why she strongly opposes the idea of colonialism for it uproots people. She criticizes Europe and the United States for their hand in colonizing other nations for the sake of power. She maintains that

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Weil, *Selected Essay*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> The impersonal pertains to the decentering of oneself. Impersonality pertains to not putting oneself above everything. See, Joke J. Hermsen, “The Impersonal and the Other,” *The European Journal of Women's Studies* Vol. 6 (1999), 187. Cf. Steven Burns, “Justice and Impersonality: Simone Weil on Rights and Obligations,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* Vol. 49 No. 3 (1993): 478.

<sup>13</sup> Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, She writes: “love of the past has nothing to do with our reactionary political inclinations.”

colonizing a country robs it of its past and erases the traces of its national identity over time. Her idea of rootedness is at risk of being labeled as nationalistic but she distances it from nationalist sentiments “for [the latter] always produces toxic ideologies such as fascism, capitalism, and communism – which are all considered as destructive.”<sup>15</sup> The destructive tendencies which she has observed during her time pushed her to be suspicious of many, if not all, political ideologies, as she argues: “It is the very concept of the nation that needs to be suppressed – or rather, the manner in which the word is used. For the word national and the expressions of which it forms part are empty of all meaning: their only content are millions of corpses, orphans, disabled men, tears, and despair.”<sup>16</sup> The idea of nationalism is far from what true rootedness is. As for Weil and other contemporary figures like George Orwell, nationalism is a blind love for one’s country, finding no fault in it and putting it high up on a pedestal. In his essay *Notes on Nationalism*, Orwell differentiates nationalism from patriotism, as he writes:

Nationalism is the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognizing no duty that of advancing its interest. Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism. By ‘patriotism’ I mean devotion to a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people.<sup>17</sup>

But unlike him, Weil is also cautious of patriotism. She argues that patriotism is one of the three temptations that we must avoid when dealing with the problem of colonial practice. She maintains that “it inclines us to put our own country before justice or to believe that there can never be any question of having to choose between them.”<sup>18</sup> And like Orwell, Weil understands nationalism as a source of dispute rather than unity especially when there is an imposition (similar to colonialism and imperialism). Orwell maintains that “nationalism is power-hunger tempered by self-deception.”<sup>19</sup> This dishonesty and one’s belief that their deceit is true are the major elements for committing atrocious crimes. As Orwell explains:

The nationalist not only approves of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them. For quite six years, the English admirers of Hitler contrived not to learn of the existence of Dachau and Buchenwald. And those who are loudest in denouncing the German

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<sup>15</sup> Inese Radzins, “Simone Weil’s Political Thought: Towards a Post-Colonial Ethics,” *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestation and Transcendence Incarnate*, ed. Pamela Sue Anderson (Netherlands: Springer, 2010), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Weil, “The Power of Words,” in *Selected Essays*, 159.

<sup>17</sup> George Orwell, *Notes on Nationalism* (London: Penguin Modern, 2018), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Weil, “East and West,” *Selected Essays*, 195.

<sup>19</sup> Orwell, *Nationalism*, 10.

concentration camps are often quite unaware, or only very dimly aware, that there are also concentration camps in Russia.<sup>20</sup>

“Nationalists” become blinded by their own shortcomings or decided to disregard the horrors their own countries have inflicted. It becomes easy for them to overlook their faults and to just point their fingers at other nations. As Weil points out:

The harm that Germany would have done to Europe if Britain had not prevented the German victory is the harm that colonization does, in that it uproots people. It would have deprived people of their past. The loss of the past is the descent into colonial enslavement. This harm that Germany tried to do to us, we [France] did to others.<sup>21</sup>

This is one of the reasons why Weil maintains that there is a need for re-rooting France during her lifetime. This need for re-rooting is also a necessity for all nations which were once colonized. Rediscovering one’s history and culture is one of the steps that we need to take for roots to grow. But this re-rooting is faced with many challenges, as Frantz Fanon suggests: “decolonizing is riddled with more suffering and pain than when the colonization took place.”<sup>22</sup> These sufferings will only be meaningful when we continue to grow our roots not just historically but also spiritually.

### *Spiritual Rootedness as Mystical Experience*

Simone Weil is commonly labeled as a mystic and her later thoughts, mystical in nature. In her biographical account, the shift from her mainly socio-political to religious thoughts happened right after her time at the Renault factory in 1935. Her first mystical experience happened during her stay in Portugal, having witnessed the procession of the wives of fishermen blessing their ships and their mournful hymns struck her with the archetypal human sadness. Reminiscent of her struggles in the factory, Weil ultimately realized that “Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of the slaves that they cannot help but belong to it, and I among others.”<sup>23</sup> This is the turning point of her thoughts—from her revolutionary ideas waning until the realization that

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Weil, “East and West,” in *Selected essays*, 199-200. Weil is pertaining to what happened to the French colonies before the World War II; specifically, what happened to French Indochina, as she writes: “through our fault, little Polynesians recite in school: ‘our ancestors that Gauls had blond hair and blue eyes ...’ Alain Gerbault has described how we [French] make these populations literally die of sadness, by forbidding their customs, their traditions, of their past.”

<sup>22</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* trans Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>23</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 67.

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maybe something outside the socio-political realm is the answer to her ultimate question of meaning. But Weil remains outside the Church. She refuses baptism for the reason that she is afraid that being baptized would mean her being unable to merge into the crowd in their everyday lives.<sup>24</sup> She argues that she needs to be with them “in order to know them so as to love them just as they are,”<sup>25</sup> or her being “adopted into a circle, to find that she is at home in any human setting”<sup>26</sup> which was foreign to her, as she never felt at home with anybody. She clarifies that these reasons are not contradictory, as she writes to Fr. Perrin: “to be lost to know it [the collective] is not to form part of it, and my capacity to mix with all of them implies that I belong to none.”<sup>27</sup> She uses her being an outsider to look at the whole picture.

Mysticism is commonly understood as the art of union with Reality. Anthony Steinbock called it the vertical experience, for the term bears more existential sense as “verticality expresses a lived directedness – religiously, morally, and bodily.”<sup>28</sup> St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the cross best exemplify Western Mysticism. But mysticism is not only limited to people within Christianity. Etty Hillesum and Simone Weil, both outsiders of the Church, have had their own mystical experiences.<sup>29</sup> Their experiences were rooted not from a religious perspective but a psychoanalytic one for Hillesum, and a social one for Weil.<sup>30</sup>

Being the art of union with Reality would entail answering the question: what is reality? Reality could mean nature, the world, or God—or all three of them. For Simone Weil, the world is the reality, and she considers the world as material relationships and as the horizon of all that is.<sup>31</sup> The trace of Marx’s thought is pervasive in such a way that this materialist perspective of Weil is a product of her reading of Marx. The material relationship she mentions pertains to both natural and social relationship which ultimately makes up human beings. The world as the source of relationships is also the source of suffering through alienation, colonization, war, and others; this was the starting point of Weil’s mysticism. Her experiences of pain in the world became an avenue for her to experience grace. This is a central concept necessary for understanding when it comes to her mystic experiences.<sup>32</sup> As she recalls

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<sup>24</sup> See Timothy Calvert OP, “Simone Weil: Patron Saint of Outsiders,” *New Blackfriars* Vol. 81 (2000): 179.

<sup>25</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*. 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Fiona Bowie, “Modern Women Mystics: Etty Hillesum and Simone Weil,” *New Blackfriars* Vol. 76 Issue 892 (1995), 178.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Inese Radzins, “Truly Incarnated: Simone Weil’s Revised Christianity,” in *The Relevance of the Radical* ed A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone (London: Continuum, 2010), 222.

<sup>32</sup> Bartomeu Estelrich, “Simone Weil’s Concept of Grace,” *Modern Theology* 25:2 (April 2009), 248.

in one of her letters, “the word of God had no place at all in my thoughts until the day – about three years ago (1938) – when I could no longer keep it out.”<sup>33</sup> During one of her intense bouts of headache, she felt “a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of a human being.”<sup>34</sup> She started directing her thoughts towards God and Christ without really abandoning her ideas on the suffering of the world. Through her mysticism, she formulated her notion of grace which became our means to root ourselves spiritually. It is what connects us to the Divine Absolute. Grace is what allows us to *decreate* the “I” which Weil maintains is the root of all the injustices in the world.<sup>35</sup> It is through grace that the “I” slowly fades until “we empty ourselves and become nothing.”<sup>36</sup> To be empty should not be taken negatively because it is in this emptiness that Weil believes that we become more open in knowing and accepting God.<sup>37</sup> There is a need to *decreate* the “I” because it obscures our perspectives and the only way “to escape from the errors of false perspective is to carry one’s heart beyond space, beyond the world, to God.”<sup>38</sup> This emptying of the self allows a person to await the presence of the Divine to live a life designed to be genuine. And we can only do this through practicing attention.

## Attentive Waiting

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.”<sup>39</sup> 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 and to them.<sup>40</sup> This is the very core of attention: being present for the other. It becomes the rarest

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<sup>33</sup> Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters* trans Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 140.

<sup>34</sup> Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> The “I” is the root of all injustices because the emphasis on a person necessarily creates the illusion that one is above others. See, Lisa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (London: I.B Tauris, 2014), 172.

<sup>36</sup> Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* trans Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956), 331. See, Neil Pembroke, “Two Spiritualities of Self-Emptying,” *Studies in Spirituality* 25 (2015), 276.

<sup>37</sup> Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 297.

<sup>38</sup> McCullough, *Religious Philosophy*, 177.

<sup>39</sup> Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 70. “The French term *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,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 6:1 (1998), 60.

and purest form of generosity not because we give away tangible things, but because we give others our undivided time and presence. We give a part of ourselves that cannot be repaid through money or any worldly matter. We give a part of ourselves that we cannot take back.

Weil's life is a testament to this attentiveness towards others to the point that somehow she forgot to attend to her own needs.<sup>41</sup> Attentiveness strengthened her conviction that self-centeredness will not help us attain the good that we are continuously searching for. 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.<sup>42</sup> It is such an obligation for it involves treating others the way they are meant to be treated. We must become attentive to others for us to understand them and for us to give them the support that they need. Moral obligation is not just being there for them when they do not need us, but precisely being there when they are at their lowest; when they feel as though they are invisible and do not deserve any attention.

It is best to understand her motivation in emphasizing attention. This notion takes shape as she questions her intellectual capacity and her search for truth. How do we find truth? Can we really find it in this world? Her quest for truth leads her to emphasize the idea of attention which is not limited to the immanent but also the transcendent world. She shares the same sentiment with Heinrich von Kleist—a German novelist through 1811—that knowledge of the physical world would never be enough to know the meaning of life. To support this available knowledge, one must have a continuous apprenticeship in attention.<sup>43</sup> This allows us to know the meaning of life. She maintains that this apprenticeship presupposes intellectual honesty.<sup>44</sup> She writes: “I have an extremely severe standard for intellectual honesty, so severe that I never met anyone who did not seem to fall short of it in more than one respect; and I am always afraid of failing in it myself.”<sup>45</sup> This intellectual honesty she suggests presupposes the role of schools and universities in the preparation of everyone to become attentive towards the different issues surrounding the society and ultimately towards that good that we all aspire to achieve.

### *Attention as The Very Telos of Education*

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<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, 57. See. Christopher Hamilton, “Simone Weil’s Human Personality: Between the Personal and the Impersonal,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98:2 (2005), 194.

<sup>43</sup> Von der Ruhr, *Apprenticeship in Attention*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 40.



As early as the pre-war period, education already permeated Weil's thoughts; given that she is first and foremost an educator, this is inevitable. It is evident in her notebooks that she had a very unconventional idea of what education should entail. She maintains that "an education which would educate the imagination"<sup>46</sup> should be given emphasis. She advocated for the study of the arts (such as performance arts and literature) since studying the arts gives one a sense of being part of a society, with its culture and life in general.

The education system is one of the cores of society. It is imperative in building a person, an important facet of nation-building. Simone Weil shares the same view with Paulo Freire<sup>47</sup> as they both maintain that the traditional pedagogy of teachers being the "giver" of knowledge is not enough for the holistic development of students. Though she does not specifically write a philosophy of education, she gives a significant amount of thought to the purpose of education throughout her lifetime. In her last written essay, she maintains that "the most important part of teaching is to teach what is to know."<sup>48</sup> She is not particular in saying that teaching is about imparting knowledge. She is more particular in teaching the meaning of knowing, such as to battle ignorance and to be able to make informed decisions.<sup>49</sup> This kind of teaching must involve a pedagogy that is person-centered, a pedagogy focused on the individual as everyone has different ways of learning.<sup>50</sup> As an educator, Weil followed a pedagogy that emphasizes the notion of attention. Attention, she maintains, is where justice flows.<sup>51</sup> As Mario von der Ruhr emphasizes, "attention is always towards the truth."<sup>52</sup> Common knowledge dictates that truth is not limited to what we are being presented with, thus the task is to search for the truth outside what is being taught to us.

In discussing attention and education, it is important to note that attention is openness. Openness becomes hard because of what Weil called "gravity." Gravity is what pulls the human mind into thinking lower states. This means that gravity—which can be exemplified by trivial matters—confines the human mind into thinking lower ideals, making humans self-centered. Our self-centeredness brought about by gravity hinders us to share in the reality of others. It breeds apathy. Therefore, she maintains that we must practice attention and learn how to be free from the grasp of

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<sup>46</sup> Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Von der Ruhr, *Apprenticeship in Attention*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 364.

<sup>49</sup> Angelo Caranfa, "Contemplative Instruction and the Gifts of Beauty, Love, and Silence," *Educational Theory* Vol. 6 No. 5 (2010), 570-72.

<sup>50</sup> Charlotte Sexton, "On the Streets with Paulo Freire and Simone Weil," *Counterpoints* Vol. 500 PAULO FREIRE: The Global Legacy (2015), 321.

<sup>51</sup> Erica daCosta, "Four Simone Weil," *The Women's Review of Books* Vol. 21 No. 4 (June 2004), 7.

<sup>52</sup> Von der Ruhr, *Apprenticeship in Attention*, 20.

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gravity which we could achieve through decreation through the idea of right education.<sup>53</sup>

For her, education is an “attentive endurance.”<sup>54</sup> She asserts that the “true telos of education is the development of attention,”<sup>55</sup> and the telos of attention is “contact with God.”<sup>56</sup> Like Freire, she argues that learning is not just learning about facts but learning about life. She thus sees learning as apprenticeship, an apprenticeship in and for life. In her essay, *The Right Use of School Studies*—arguably her most essential writing pertaining to education—she writes that “the real object of school studies is to cultivate attention.”<sup>57</sup> She maintains that learning is not limited to the grades that students get but to the amount of attention they learn to put into things that they want to know and understand. Attention is not the kind of physical attention, i.e., a muscular effort or willpower such as looking intently into text.<sup>58</sup> It is also not the kind that puts mental stress into one’s psyche just to finish the task. “Attention consists of suspending our thoughts,”<sup>59</sup> and keeping minds empty, detached, and open to new knowledge, and becomes critical about it.

She maintains that the school should teach not just facts, but also a disposition towards life. School classes should not be limited to factual knowledge but should be accompanied by existential and moral wisdom.<sup>60</sup> At the core of every individual which must be shaped is one’s notion of justice. Our notion of justice will shape our way of acting towards others. Justice is an important facet of her philosophy, which she defines as “consisting of seeing no harm is done to humans[.]”<sup>61</sup> This can only be learned through attention as it shares a certain kind of affinity with truth and beauty.<sup>62</sup> With the knowledge of justice through attentive learning, we are now capable of attentive action, a much-needed type of action at present. In a world where people are acting purely on their selfishness, this proves to be an important lesson that must be learned. Apart from learning basic mathematics and languages, this is the

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<sup>53</sup> Kazuaki Yoda, “An Approach to Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Education Through the Notion of Reading,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* Vol. 36 No. 6 (2017): 663-682.

<sup>54</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 49-61.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a1, trans. W.D Ross and J.O Urmson in the *Complete Works of Aristotle* ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). See also Jason D. Whitt, “Teaching Attentiveness in the Classroom and Learning to Attend to Persons with Disabilities,” *International Journal of Christianity and Education* Vol. 19 (3) (2013), 216.

<sup>56</sup> C.A Nelson, “Simone Weil and Institutional Education,” in *The Relevance of the Radical* ed. A. Rebecca Rozelle Stone and Lucian Stone, 78.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>58</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God.*, 60. See *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62.

<sup>60</sup> Mary-Zoe Bowden, “Teaching as a Moral Act: Simone Weil’s Liminality as an Addition to the Moral Conversation in Education,” (PhD diss., University of Central Florida, 2009), 178-179. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>61</sup> Weil, *Anthology*, 93.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

truth that we must all aspire to know, possible only through understanding the significance of the presence of others. To pay attention necessitates the presence of others, as one cannot pay attention to nothing. Attention must always have an object.

Another important notion in the study of attention is her idea of “reading.” She argues that our interaction with others can be analogous to our reading of them. Most of the time, our reading of others is informed by gravity as we base our readings mostly on trivial matters about their personhood such as appearance. This gives room for misjudgment.<sup>63</sup> We must understand that reading and action are two inseparable entities in Weil’s formulation.<sup>64</sup> In her idea of action, we always read and respond with our entire being. She highlights the body’s involvement in reading and writes, “the body plays a part in all apprenticeship”<sup>65</sup> and that “every apprenticeship is learning to read in a certain way.”<sup>66</sup> Cultivation then of attention is not just an apprenticeship of the spirit but also of the body. This is something which should be taught in schools. She writes: “as one has to learn to read and practice a trade, so one must learn to feel in all things, first and almost solely, the obedience of the universe to God. It is really an apprenticeship. Like any other, it requires time and effort.”<sup>67</sup>

Going back to her notion of need, we understand that while only individuals have needs and obligation to fulfill these needs, an individual cannot be understood in isolation; this fulfillment of needs must be situated as an interpersonal practice. She emphasizes the need to ask the other-centered question: what are you going through?<sup>68</sup> By asking this question, the attentive person does what she calls the emptying of the soul which happens as “the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as she is, in all her truths.”<sup>69</sup> It goes to show that true attention involves a selfless emptying of the self to fully understand the other and her needs. As cliché as it may sound, this is the core of attention—attentive waiting—as one cannot entirely understand the other without waiting for that other to present themselves to us. As with her notion of reading, we have our own ways of reading others as they have their own way of letting themselves be read by us. We need to learn how to show empathy in its purest form for them to reveal themselves to us.

Though attention is manifested through the situatedness of the individual in the interpersonal, one can still exercise attentiveness in solitude. As Weil notes: “in solitude[,] we are in the presence of mere matter, things of less value (perhaps) than

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<sup>63</sup> Simone Weil, “Essay on Reading,” *Late Philosophical Writings* trans. Eric Sprinsted and Lawrence Schmidt (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2015), 209. See Yoda, “Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Education,” 668.

<sup>64</sup> Yoda, “Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Education,” 670.

<sup>65</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 132.

<sup>66</sup> Weil, “Essay on Reading,” 301.

<sup>67</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 131.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

a human spirit. Its value lies in the greater possibility of attention. If we could be attentive to the same degree in the presence of a human being.”<sup>70</sup> It is in solitude that we exercise attention in its purest form and expression which is love.

### Love as the Maximal Attention

There is a need to cultivate first attention in the level of the intellect as “intelligence has a role in the preparation of the nuptial consent to God.”<sup>71</sup> Without the intellect, we will not be able to understand what holds us back from consenting to God. She maintains that “it [intellect] consists in looking at the evil in oneself and hating it; not trying to get rid of it, but simply decrying it until one feels repulsed by it.”<sup>72</sup> An attentive intellect helps one to become aware of her possibilities and allows for the realization of the real. She maintains that:

The necessary connections which constitute the very reality of the world have no reality in themselves except as the object of intellectual attention in action. This virtue of intellectual attention makes it an image of the Wisdom of God. God creates by the act of thinking. We, by intellectual attention, do not indeed create, we produce object, yet in our sphere we do in a certain way give birth to reality.<sup>73</sup>

This notion, as much as Weil embraces the Kantian perspective that the mind is what orders reality as reality has no intrinsic order in itself, is closer in affinity with Spinoza’s “adequate ideas.”<sup>74</sup> She maintains that the different degrees of attention produce different degrees of reality. The limited intellectual attention that a person has allows her to recognize conditional relations in the order of the world but this is only capable of producing “half-reality.”<sup>75</sup> This half-reality is not the reality that everyone must strive for, as this is half-real and half-illusion. It is not reality at all but merely a falsity. The source of this illusion is what we call attachments. These attachments are part of the gravity that pulls us down.

In a letter to Joë Bousquet, she points out that daydreaming is a temporary consolation to the afflicted but is an unhealthy way of reprieve as it feeds us the unreal.<sup>76</sup> She argues that there is a strong need to destroy this faux reality to attain

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<sup>70</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 121.

<sup>71</sup> Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 139.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among The Ancient Greeks* trans. Elizabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London: Routledge, 1976), 188.

<sup>74</sup> Blake McAllister, “Adequate and Inadequate Ideas in Spinoza,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* Vol. 31 No. 2 (2014): 119-136.

<sup>75</sup> Weil, *Intimations of Christianity*, 188.

<sup>76</sup> Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 141.

genuine reality and the only way to do so is to pay attention.<sup>77</sup> She maintains that “the influence of the real needs and compulsions, of real interests and materials, is indirect because the crowd is never conscious of it. To become conscious of even the simplest realities, one needs to pay attention.”<sup>78</sup> But according to her, intellectual attention is insufficient, as the only way we can reach the ultimate truth is through the purest form of it or what she maintains as love. Love is the manifestation of extreme attention. As she writes: “we confer upon objects and upon persons around us all that we have of all the fullness of reality when to this intellectual attention we add that attention of still higher degree which is acceptance, consent, and love.”<sup>79</sup> In this sense, we can understand that “love produces reality.”<sup>80</sup>

We are led to ask: what makes being attentive the gateway to achieve the real? The way Weil characterizes attention sums it all up. She argues that “attention consists of suspending our thoughts, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.”<sup>81</sup> It may sound as if she is calling for passivity on our part, and that it contradicts the very nature of humans as seekers of truth. Yet, she maintains that attention is always “active passivity.”<sup>82</sup> Weil argues that “attention is an effort, the greatest effort of all, perhaps, but it is a negative effort.”<sup>83</sup> It is “not to be confused with muscular effort,”<sup>84</sup> which does not necessarily give us the result that we are aiming for but only makes us tired. True attention does not require or produce tiredness.<sup>85</sup> Weil argues that if one becomes tired it means that one becomes attached to the object rather than one paying attention to it. She writes a moving piece that truly encapsulates this thought: “we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting them.”<sup>86</sup> As in every intellectual pursuit, mistakes happen when we do things in haste. As we derive conclusions from immediate concepts and thoughts, our mind becomes clouded with prejudices which results in either poor translations or faulty arguments.<sup>87</sup> And this does not only apply to the intellectual realm but also to the spiritual one:

Active searching is prejudicial, not only to love, but also to the intelligence, whose laws are the same as those of love. We just have to wait for the solution of a geometrical problem or the meaning of Latin or Greek sentence to come to mind. Still more must we wait

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<sup>77</sup> Weil, *Notebooks*, 313.

<sup>78</sup> Weil, *Selected Essays*, 150-151.

<sup>79</sup> Weil, *Intimations of Christianity*, 188.

<sup>80</sup> Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 90.

<sup>81</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62.

<sup>82</sup> McCullough, *Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, 30.

<sup>83</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>87</sup> Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62.

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for any new scientific truth or for a beautiful line of poetry. Seeking leads us astray. This is the case with every form or what is truly good. Everyone should do nothing but wait for good and keep evil away.<sup>88</sup>

And where does the notion of love enter? Pure attention is best expressed through love, characterized by a desire for pure and authentic values such as truth, beauty, and goodness.<sup>89</sup> She maintains that the “desire for beauty, when it reaches a certain degree of intensity and purity, is the same thing as genius.”<sup>90</sup> She has a very profound understanding of what genius entails. For her, it is not just within the realm of the natural as talents are.<sup>91</sup> Weil explains:

Genius is distinct from talents, to my mind, by its deep regard and intelligence for the common life of common people – I mean people without talent. The most beautiful poetry is the poetry that can best express, in its truth, the life of people who cannot write poetry. Outside of that, there is only clever poetry; and mankind can do very well without clever poetry. Cleverness makes the aristocracy of intelligence; the soul of genius is caritas, in the Christian signification of the world; the sense that every human being is all-important.<sup>92</sup>

This capacity to be a genius is not easily acquired by many or by all, as it is not easy to desire God once and for all, as much as it is to think of all human beings as important. Caritas, charity, the higher kind of love, springs from God and it bleeds through others.<sup>93</sup>

### Conclusion

This rootedness pertains to our rootedness in the real, with the acceptance of both the good and the bad. The world created in beauty and order becomes disorderly and chaotic because of our desire for prestige, using force to uproot others, and inflicting others with unnecessary suffering. People will always argue that they are using force for self-preservation, but our civilization and our history are littered with many moments of conquest and war fought not for self-preservation but to assert dominance over the other. People are too self-centered to think of others and to

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 197. See also Weil, *Notebooks*, 301.

<sup>89</sup> Weil, *Notebooks*, 449.

<sup>90</sup> Weil, *Intimations of Christianity*, 150.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>92</sup> Weil, *Seventy Letters*, 104-5. This is part of her letter to an Oxford Poet, Mr. Charles G. Bell, written in 1938.

<sup>93</sup> Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 262.

preserve whatever is left of them. We tend to put ourselves in the center of our own universes, not having any care whether we are eclipsing others' and uprooting them. Uprooting people could be equated to killing them, not in a mere physical way but many other ways. The lost culture or identity, metaphorical ways of killing people. A nation's assertion that her culture is superior to the other is a large-scale act of uprooting. On the micro-level, one's mere disregard of other's humanity is an example of uprooting. Disregarding the homeless or the poorest of the poor is uprooting them; not treating them as human beings but mere objects which cause us inconvenience is uprooting them naturally and spiritually. Our society today is too immersed in self-prosperity that it makes us numb and deaf to the cries of help of those who are in need. We are too focused on the idea that we have to be successful, measured by material things, prestige, power, and wealth that we become poor in spirit. We are becoming unaware that we are losing our humanity, our roots, the more that we pursue these trivialities.

Indeed, we have different ways of attaining authenticity—What I may think would give me an authentic existence would not be the same with another. But the point is, the more that we become drowned in the materiality of the world, the harder it is for us to find that thing that could give us genuine satisfaction or peace. Finding that inner voice or that which calms us is difficult amid the noisy lifestyle that we have become accustomed to. Tracing back our roots is hard when it is us who try to uproot ourselves just to fit in what is considered a norm. My reading of Simone Weil has led me to the realization and gave me a much stronger conviction that we must try to find our way back to our own roots. It may involve radical changes, it may involve struggles, but in the end, to find your own essence is still and will always be worth it.

In our present time wherein uprooting people seem to be the norm, we owe it to ourselves to find and be in touch with our roots. When national identity is being sacrificed for something outside us, we run the risk of not truly knowing who we are and what we are supposed to be. Identity crisis might seem a minor problem, but this crisis eventually leads us to major dilemmas. The uprooting of one would always lead to the uprooting of others. That is why we must try not to be uprooted and if it is caused by external factors, we must take necessary actions to re-root ourselves. We can do that by being in touch with our past and make peace with it. Our history is not just our ancestry, it involves all of our past experiences and previous struggles. It is important for us to look back and to find beauty or goodness in it. Through this re-rooting, we will be able to move forward with a genuine understanding of our existence.

This is authentic living for Weil: being rooted means living with the good and the bad. When we are rooted in our history, we will always be rooted spiritually. A person who has rooted herself in the past will be able to *decreate* the I in herself and, thus, allow her to decenter her focus from the self towards the other. When one has already shifted her gaze to people or things outside herself, she can now be truly attentive. This attention would give her the chance to truly know the reality of the

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world and to truly commune with God – which must be the end goal of all. We need this search for authenticity for we are currently living in a world full of trivialities and falsities. We owe it to ourselves to make meaning out of our lives. When we try to make meaning, we are helping our world to become a better place for an individual who has found purpose and is living an authentic life would not add affliction to the already afflicted world. An authentic individual will not uproot others and will be able to help others find their way back to their own roots.

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