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Simone Weil on Study, Prayer, and Love

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Theological education centers on attention. Attending to another person's thoughts, their arguments, their conceptions – studying, parsing, comparing, etc. This is not a novel claim. The Jewish philosopher Simone Weil, however, claims that there is more going on as we work out a geometry problem, tussle over a difficult argument, or wade through a difficult theological text. Attention in academic studies, she argues, trains us for prayer and for loving our neighbors (“Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” in *Waiting for God*, 57-66). Weil implies that attention is like a muscle. Giving attention to academic studies trains that muscle so it can be flexed by attending to God in prayer and attending to our others in love.

Prayer first. Contemplation consists of attention: “the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.” Studies train that muscle. *More* is therefore happening when we carefully attend to the thoughts of others in the theological classroom. Even a geometry problem can accomplish this.

If we have no aptitude or natural taste for geometry, this does not mean that our faculty for attention will not be developed by wrestling with a problem or studying a theorem. On

the contrary, it is almost an advantage. ... Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention is wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind.

If we concentrate our attention on trying to solve a problem of geometry, and if at the end of an hour we are no nearer to doing so than at the beginning, we have nevertheless been making progress each minute of that hour in another more mysterious dimension. Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer.

What is Weil doing? She is shifting the *telos* of study according to her religious imagination. "Students must therefore work without any wish to gain good marks, to pass examinations, to win school successes." Rather, "applying themselves equally to all their tasks, with the idea that each one will help to form in them the habit of that attention which is the substance of prayer . . . To make this the sole and exclusive purpose of our studies is the first condition to be observed if we are to put them to the right use." The *telos* of study—good marks or the aptitude for prayer—orients the student's motivation and intention.

Now love for others. Love for our neighbors is also served through academic studies. Weil's argument tracks along the same lines as before. Love requires attention. Thus, by training our attention-muscles through academic studies, we are better able to flex those muscles toward our neighbors. She explains:

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer 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, pity are not enough. . . .

Only he who is capable of attention can do this.

So it comes about that paradoxical as it may seem, a Latin prose or a geometry problem, even though they are done wrong, may be of great service one day, provided we devote the right kind of effort to them. Should the occasion arise, they can one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need.

If Weil is right (I believe she is) then we could say something bold like this: careful, patient, and deliberate attention to the thoughts, arguments, and conceptions of others can serve not only the cultivation of one's abilities as a theologian, but also one's capacity for loving attention to God and others.

We are bombarded today with distraction and constantly lured with promises of entertainment, but wouldn't it be wonderful if theological education were forming persons fit for

contemplation? Today, partisanship and fear so quickly divides us, but wouldn't it be wonderful if theological education were forming citizens capable of compassion? What if - dare we dream - that through attention, theological education could train us *for love*?

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