

It Describes What God Is

Matthew Spellberg, *Harvard University*

Simone Weil (1947/2002) writes: “[t]he authentic and pure values—truth, beauty and goodness—in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object.” Then she adds: “[t]eaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act.” Attention is the center and circumference of the human ethical sphere; education is the device, like a sextant or compass, that guides us down the meridian.

The ubiquity and familiarity of the word *attention* makes it hard for us to divine its deep meaning. Very often, when in a pedagogical context, we tell students to pay attention, we expect, and so engender, the following behavior (again I use Weil’s description):

If one says to one’s pupils: ‘Now you must pay attention,’ one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. If after two minutes they are asked what they have been paying attention to, they cannot reply. They have been concentrating on nothing. They have not been paying attention. They have been contracting their muscles (Weil 1950/2001).

Another notion, equally fallacious, is that attention is the same as stupefaction—that students need to be given something that can usurp their minds, as when a teacher makes them watch a movie not mainly for its content, but primarily to keep them occupied and quiet, their mouths agape and eyes wide.

The first mistake about attention consists in assuming it is solely about the subject’s capacity for exertion toward the object. The second mistake is assuming it is solely about the object’s capacity to absorb, sponge-like, the subject’s consciousness. The first might be called the *blood-and-sweat* model of attention, the second the *slack-jaw* model of attention. Exertion and absorption are not without value; but as models for attention, they are lacking in that they reduce it to a contest of forces, narrowing the world to two magnetic poles trying to overwhelm one another. They fail to imply a genuine relation between a discrete act of learning and the wider intellectual landscape within which it necessarily exists.

What does an attention that respects such a relation look like? This essay offers a partial answer: namely, that the ideal pedagogical attention cannot simply posit a direct relationship between subject and object. Rather, it must radiate out from the thing observed toward a whole vision of the world that makes the observation intelligible—a world-system that envelopes the learning subject and the object of his intellection and stands them in a universal relation to one another.

This is necessary because students themselves come into the classroom with some larger vision of the world (worked out to a greater or lesser degree) and because the discrete facts or concepts teachers have to offer originate in such a larger vision as well. Pedagogy should always begin in the modeling of what might be called a *cosmic attention*. Teachers must be on the lookout for windows into students’ world-systems, and in that way show them how to mirror such attention back to the world of conventions the students themselves are being asked, every day, to enter.

The ideas I trace in what follows emerged from six years’ work as a teacher in prisons. They crystallized in an intensive collaboration with a single student, who deserves the lion’s share of any value that may accrue from these pages and none of the blame for any of the weaknesses that may be manifest in them. These remarks may be of particular use to prison educators in their difficult and privileged task of teaching students who have lived full lives, and who have developed a full intellectual profile, outside of our society’s prevailing educational institutions. But they may also speak to the political implications of education more broadly, and clarify the duties of educators in their role as mediators between individuals and a society’s norms.

In a New Jersey prison, I worked closely with R. F. He was in a developmental writing class and although he worked harder than any student I had seen before or since, he was unable to understand certain basic concepts: what it meant to write a complete sentence or use a comma, to perform a simple paraphrase, or to advance a simple written argument. At the end of the term, I consented to an independent study with him so that he might be able to pass the class. The two of us met for six weeks into the next semester. I began to see then that the issue was not only with sentences.

Once we were talking—in relation to the 2014 Ferguson protests—about city government. R. seemed to struggle to understand who did what. So I asked, “Who is the head of a city?” He replied, “Bill De Blasio.” I said, “Okay, but who is the head of a city in general?” He said, “In general, Bill De Blasio is the mayor of New York.” I said, “Alright, De Blasio is mayor of New York and Rahm Emmanuel is mayor of Chicago. What do they have in common?” “They have nothing in common” was his answer. “One is the mayor of New York and one is the mayor of Chicago.” R. had not learned to play what Wittgenstein might call the language game of generalization—in general, a mayor is the head of a city. Instead, a different game prevailed, what might be called the game of particularity: to him, the distinct and specific were paramount, not the abstract and the held-in-common.

As part of our lessons in grammar, R. and I spent many hours playing the following game: I would line up three chairs

in a row and we would walk through a sentence, putting our hands on the first chair at the subject, the second chair at the verb, and the third chair for the rest of the predicate. When there were two clauses in the sentence, we would go back to the first chair for the second subject and begin again.

instances; perhaps they presuppose an entirely singular vision of reality. Either way, there is no certainty that any teacher's attempts (including my own) to understand the system behind a person's thoughts will be correct. But to approach a student (especially an adult student) as if he or

These remarks may be of particular use to prison educators in their difficult and privileged task of teaching students who have lived full lives, and who have developed a full intellectual profile, outside of our society's prevailing educational institutions. But they may also speak to the political implications of education more broadly, and clarify the duties of educators in their role as mediators between individuals and a society's norms.

We were playing this game with a passage from James Baldwin when we came upon the word "Lord," as in God. R. seemed to hesitate about which chair to go to. I said, "Well, take a step back from the sentence. What part of speech is *Lord*?" R. answered without hesitation, "Adjective." I asked why. He said, "Because it describes what God is." There was silence. "Well, am I right?" asked R. In the moment, I did not know.

This exchange was one of the most important in my whole career as a teacher for it opened a sudden window onto R.'s way of ordering the universe—another person's universe. Can you imagine a grammatical system in which a master-word is the only noun and all synonyms are merely descriptions of the one essential thing, in this case, the being at the center of the cosmos? In meditating on this assertion—*the Lord describes what God is*—I was able, for an instant, to have R.'s order of the world become my own, to see the logic of it, its potential for explication and for beauty, to understand that a comprehensive vision was being postulated behind this one interpretation.

To understand such utterances as pregnant with a whole epistemology, to be able to discern the sonic echo an individual surmise returns from the farthest boundaries of the universe within which it was constituted—*this* is the heart of pedagogical attention. It forces the mind into an unfamiliar and dilated pose, as might happen after considering the paradoxes of Julian the Anchoress or the puzzles of Borges. It enjoins us to turn and look to the limitations of our own system of order; it simultaneously obligates us to receive the cosmology of another.

One of the defining facts of prison education is that teachers regularly encounter adult students who have not been fully socialized into the way of thinking about the world—the way of ordering the world—that is taught in schools, that is required (even enforced) in our universities and other institutions of higher learning. Many of them have instead built their own systems—in part through culture, in part on their own—to give some sense to the life they have lived in sorrow and in health.

These private systems are not always conscious; neither are they necessarily immutable or free from contradiction and lacuna. Perhaps their structures are unique only in discrete

she has a fleshed-out and working mode of thought radically different from the teacher's own—rather than assuming they possess a conventional worldview beset by certain arbitrary holes or inadequacies—is an essential stance for all educators. It unveils the possibility of alternatives to our prevailing system of order, and it reminds us that we ourselves do no more, if also no less, than teach such a system with its own boundaries and limitations. Such a stance would forbid us from ever imagining that facts can be imparted as unanchored in the world (how, for example, mathematical concepts are so often and scandalously taught as mere rote formulas, without any explanation of their proofs). Each of us works within systems, and when information is introduced, it will be soldered onto some model of the universe—if not one a teacher explicitly proposes, then one a student has waiting in reserve.

The example of R. is powerful in part because of what it is not: this anecdote has no conventional political or social charge. On the surface, this was a matter of grammar, maybe also one of metaphysics. We were not in that moment discussing—at least explicitly—race in America or the social safety net or punishment or class conflict. The story illustrates that the problem of attending to another being goes in directions deeper (or, at the very least, stranger) than politics can comprehend—at least what is commonly understood as politics. For if this relationship is political, then it is political in a form at once more personal and more ancient than our normal use of that word permits. In my career as a teacher, I have often confronted more explicit political differences with students both in prison and elsewhere, and I have likewise watched worldviews unfurl much more deliberately than R.'s. But in the conversations between R. and me, it is possible to discern an important lesson: before we arrive at the *very difficult* questions—for example, whether your vision of the divine can ever be squared with mine; whether our ideas of the good life can be reconciled; whether we can ever share in common a blueprint for a just society—we must interrogate the way we understand elementary concepts of grammar and semantics from person to person.

Such work has been largely eliminated from teaching and other spheres of public life on the assumption that, pragmatically speaking, we should get down to what "really matters" in the short time we have. It has been largely

replaced—particularly in fields like prison education, where the differences in background between teacher and student are often so considerable—by sociological taxonomies of knowledge. The peculiarities of someone like R.’s thought patterns are immediately subsumed into either a vocabulary of identity and class (he thinks like an underprivileged

be *easier* or *more familiar* or *identifiable* to the students (the slack-jaw model).

In the world at large, people are too often reduced to merely political beings—or, stated another way, politics itself is too often reduced to our presumed allegiances to the feeble and self-righteous ideologies of the present American

But in the conversations between R. and me, it is possible to discern an important lesson: before we arrive at the very difficult questions—for example, whether your vision of the divine can ever be squared with mine; whether our ideas of the good life can be reconciled; whether we can ever share in common a blueprint for a just society—we must interrogate the way we understand elementary concepts of grammar and semantics from person to person.

student of color failed by the schools in which he studied) or into a vocabulary of medicalized difference (he has a learning disability).

There are important uses for such social-scientific generalizations both in and beyond the classroom, but they nevertheless possess serious limitations. They presuppose a narrowly ethnographic epistemology of the human, in which a person’s category—their tribe, class, affiliation, diagnostic classification—suffices to make legible the complete structure of their thought and ideas. Such thinking was forged amid the colonial and industrial upheavals of the nineteenth century, and its continuing influence on everything from educational policy to identity politics makes it massively difficult for us to perceive the intellectual penumbra of any given person, for it is immediately subsumed under the practices and beliefs we ascribe to whatever population the person fits most squarely within. Such generalized, ethnographic thinking about people outside our own immediate milieu has degenerated into the deployment of the crudest clichés by intellectuals and politicians of every persuasion.

This is, again, not to say that generalizations about human beings are entirely without merit: of course they permit us to navigate the dizzying social complexity of our world, and they reflect many serious and sober historical realities. But it is a great waste of the classroom’s potential—particularly those classrooms, like in prisons, where people from dramatically different worlds meet—to let the kind of contact between individuals that education makes possible be reduced in the minds of those involved to interactions between different sociological populations. Too often, this causes the mistaken forms of attention I invoked at the beginning of this essay to predominate. Either we force students to throw themselves at a task without justifying it to them for fear they will not be able to understand the justification (the blood-and-sweat model), or we assume that they will be able to absorb only content we have decided in advance their background has primed them for, as I have seen misguided prison teachers insist that incarcerated students should study Jay-Z not primarily because he is a great artist but rather because they think his poetry will

left–right divide. In the classroom—*especially* in a politically charged classroom, as in a prison—we should remember people are cosmic beings and that the relationship to the polis was originally part and parcel of a relationship to the universe. By these claims I mean nothing particularly mystical but rather simply that human beings are bound to the entire reality they inhabit—to the sky, to the ground, to birds, to objects, to certain words or snatches of melody—and these relationships do not have to be mediated by their income bracket or age range or even nation (in fact, assuming they are can be a self-fulfilling prophecy). To draw attention to the cosmic scope of the mind is to make people conscious of it; to make people conscious of it is to give them agency over how they shape their subjective universe and to protect them from unknowingly surrendering authorship of their worldview to others, whether to the people they aspire to be like or to those they already resemble. One of the strategies of political oppression is precisely to deny that the oppressed have such a relation to the larger universe. To reassert their right to such a vision—a process that Weil called *enracinement* (rooting)—is a serious moral duty of education, and it must occur not only at the level of populations but also at the level of individuals.

Let me be clear that I am not by any means advocating a relativist position in which there are no concrete things worth teaching. On the contrary, assimilating individuals to a vision of the world is unavoidably the task of education, and we should not pretend otherwise in deference to a misplaced relativist piety. There is nothing more disingenuous than the claim educators often make that they are only teaching “critical thinking” and not any particular viewpoint. It is far more empowering to go about the task of imparting a worldview honestly, with humility about its limitations and conviction as to its usefulness. Such an attitude would permit teachers to attend as much as possible to the variations and departures from this view that exist in the individual, subjective world-systems of their students. For these have always been the seed grain for the renewal of a society’s body of knowledge and values and ought almost never to be cast out, even as conventional models are placed alongside them. We must

honestly explain to students, even in elementary classes, that we are teaching them to think within certain systems and that no fact exists independently of them. We must further explain that they already possess their own systems, which they can continue to inhabit even as they learn to share a conventional one. I have found that in my own discipline, teaching actual

settings where we have long been operating under the false assumption that everyone is—must be—on the same page. In fact, each person’s deep intuition of the world—even among those long socialized into society’s epistemic conventions—is almost certainly stranger than what we have been trained to think as educators. Our inability to confront this truthfully is,

In the classroom—especially in a politically charged classroom, as in a prison—we should remember people are cosmic beings and that the relationship to the polis was originally part and parcel of a relationship to the universe.

cosmologies—that is, mythical texts from many cultures—allows the need for human thought to unfurl at the limit of the universe to be made explicit. Analogous artifacts with such cosmic reach abound in every discipline, including the sciences and social sciences.

Yet the principle way to teach this cosmic attention is by constantly modeling it, by waiting for invitations into other worlds, and by extending them in return—modeling and being modeled back, and modeling back again. Weil might have called such an approach the *pedagogy of rootedness*. Paradoxically, such pedagogy is perhaps easier to achieve in prisons and other nonconventional classrooms than in the contemporary university. In prisons, the subterranean differences between teacher and student are often so broad as to produce visible fissures on the surface level. The starker challenge will be to learn to carry out this kind of work even in

I believe, one reason for the extraordinary fear of ideological incorrectness that plagues the culture of higher education in the present moment. These deep, at-present unspoken cosmologies are like tectonic plates gestating beneath a superficially continuous surface. We would do well to map them now before their pushing against one another causes ever-greater tremors in the public and political realm above.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to R.F., one of my best teachers. ■

REFERENCES

- Weil, Simone. 1947/2002. *Gravity and Grace*. Trans. Emma Crawford and Mario van der Ruhr. London: Routledge.
- Weil, Simone. 1950/2001. *Waiting for God*. Trans. Emma Crawford. New York: Perennial.