Attending to Others:

Simone Weil and Epistemic Pluralism

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Abstract: Since the 1980s, feminist epistemologists have traced the cultural biases that have denied epistemic value to certain epistemic styles and agents while they have explored ways to reclaim the devalued epistemic modes--including more practical, emotionally invested, and community-situated modes of knowing--that many of us have found to be meaningful ways of engaging the world. At the same time, feminist critics have sought not merely to reverse received epistemic hierarchies but to explore more pluralistic epistemologies that appreciate as well as examine critically the diverse ways that humans engage the world. This paper examines how Simone Weil’s concept of *paying attention* can contribute to such a critical and pluralist epistemology. By reading Weil’s account of “a certain kind of attention” together with feminist and decolonial critiques of modern epistemic norms, I show how Weil points toward an epistemic framework that would open our intellectual communities to a greater plurality of epistemic styles and agents and, ultimately, would make possible richer knowledge practices that are more responsive to world problems.

Since the 1980s, feminist thinkers have unsettled the very foundations of knowledge-making in the industrial world by demonstrating how our basic conception of knowledge has been distorted by cultural biases.[[1]](#endnote-1) According to this argument, the dominant culture’s model of scientific rationality and its norms of “certainty,” “universality,” and “objectivity” have been formed in the context of capitalist, patriarchal, and colonialist institutions that have mystified the epistemic styles of elite European men while “creat[ing] fearful specters” of everything associated with “‘the feminine’ and ‘the primitive’” (Harding 2008, 2). When we forget the historical origins of our epistemic norms and present them as if they defined any “knowledge worthy of the name,” these critics warn, we “choke out ways of knowing that depart from the stringent dictates of an exaggerated ideal of scientific knowledge making” (Code 1991, 2; 2006, 8-9). The resulting “epistemic discrimination” has skewed our engagement with the world toward rigid and detached intellectual styles as well as undermined the epistemic trustworthiness of women, people of color, and working-class people, who have been associated with (and who often have embraced) more situated and engaged modes of knowing (Dalmiya and Alcoff 1993, 217). The implications have extended to civic life, where people whose epistemic styles have veered from the norms of detached rationality have “not be[en] respected as equal citizens in the deliberative public” (Young 1993, 127).

In response to the biases and exclusions of mainstream intellectual communities, feminist epistemologists have explored ways to honor the more practical, emotionally invested, and community-based modes of knowing that many of us have found to be meaningful ways of engaging the world. At the same time, even feminist advocates of emotional knowing have recognized that emotions and community engagement can generate hateful and ideological thinking as much as they can inform sensitive and critical thinking (Code 1995, 120-143; Cohn 1993, 241-42; Stone-Mediatore 2010, 37-38). Thus feminist critics have sought not merely to reverse received epistemic hierarchies—not merely to embrace “the good side” of emotions, community-situatedness, and concreteness as opposed to “the bad side” of detached and abstract theory—but to explore more pluralistic epistemologies that “heal the split” between the two supposedly opposite epistemic camps (Razack 1998, 45). Likewise, feminist epistemologists have sought ways to reclaim devalued epistemic traits while also promoting more rigorous and responsible approaches to the reclaimed traits.

The work of Simone Weil pre-dates the advent of feminist epistemology by a half century; however, I argue here that Weil’s notion of *paying attention* can contribute to the kind of self-critical and pluralist epistemology that many feminists and critical epistemologists have sought. By reading Weil’s account of “a certain kind of attention” (1977a, 333) together with feminist and decolonial critiques of modern epistemic norms, I show how Weil points toward a an epistemic framework that would open our intellectual communities to a greater plurality of epistemic styles and agents and, ultimately, would make possible richer knowledge practices \*~~that would be~~ more responsive to world problems.

**“Paying Attention” as an Epistemic Virtue?**

My concern with “paying attention” began with some everyday encounters, so I begin with three stories. The first incident involved a young philosopher’s deliberate inattention to her own emotions, the second entailed a mother-activist’s denunciation of widespread societal inattention, and the third a writer’s joyful embracing of attention. In the first incident, my feminist philosophy class had read an essay by Helen Caldicott (1989), in which Caldicot seeks to convey the irrationality of nuclear-war policymaking by asking us to imagine how we would react, if a nuclear attack were imminent; in effect, she asks us to attend to the full range of fears, horrors, paralyses, and distress that such an imaginative exercise calls forth and then to consider such imaginatively generated emotional knowledge when we deliberate about nuclear-weapons policy. In response to this passage, one student explicitly disengaged from the somatic responses to which Caldicott asks us to attend, proudly exclaiming, “I’m a philosophy major; I’ve learned not to pay attention to my emotions.” Two weeks later, in that same class, a guest speaker, Mary Hladky, spoke as an anti-war activist and mother of an active-duty soldier in Afghanistan. Through tears, Hladky spoke of the lack of coherent military or political strategy in Afghanistan, the young men killed and severely maimed in her son’s unit, and the profound effects that the war has had on her once-jovial son, who, if he returns alive, will never be the same person. She stressed that this senseless war continues because the majority of Americans have “no skin in this fight” and are “not paying attention.” Her final message to college students: “*Please pay attention* to the human effects of this war.”

Finally, a few weeks later, I encountered an essay by the environmentalist writer, Terry Tempest Williams, in which Williams stresses the importance of connecting with surrounding life:

I try to live my life recognizing, honoring, and amplifying the connections that exist between all beings on the planet. . .The pattern that connects becomes a daily mantra for me. . . .[And] when this weaving of interior and exterior landscapes mesh. . .I call it paying attention” (2012, 35).

Such incidents have raised questions for me about the epistemic role of “paying attention.” Are Hladky and Caldicott correct, for instance, that better thinking about public policy relies most crucially on paying greater attention to discomfiting phenomena that our daily lives and professional routines have regularly ignored? What is the character of such attention, and how is it related to the kind of attention that Williams suggests can affirm our ties to surrounding life? And, per my student’s challenge, can some forms of attention vitiate sound thinking? In effect, such incidents have provoked me to examine more closely what it could mean to provide an account of attention as an epistemic virtue and to consider how such an account of attention might contribute to more pluralistic and responsible knowledge practices.

**Weil on “A Certain Kind of Attention”**

Simone Weil offers intriguing insight into the intertwined epistemic and ethical role of paying attention. Weil is known for her unique commitment to living her values. Taking seriously the social responsibility of scholars and educators, she proposed that academics spend time working in local industries, so as to better understand local problems and connect with grassroots social movements. She, herself, participated actively in movements against economic exploitation, fascism, and colonialism and, for over a year, took leave from her teaching position to work as a shop-floor worker in factories around Paris (Little 2003; Panichas 1977). Perhaps more than any other modern European philosopher, Weil sought to link academia to transformative social practice. And, significantly, *attention* is a central theme in her work.

In her essays, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies” and “Human Personality,” Weil describes the kind of attention that she argues is fundamental to both ethical and intellectual life. “[T]he spirit of justice and the spirit of truth,” says Weil, “is nothing else but a certain kind of attention” (1977a, 333). It is a kind of attention that forgoes mastery, concern for success, and hasty solutions in order to “contemplate attentively and slowly” the phenomena before us (Weil 1977b, 47). Weil distinguishes such attention from the practice of “contracting [our] brows, holding [our] breath, stiffening [our] muscle” that schoolchildren often confuse with paying attention but that is more about posturing than genuinely engaging a problem (1997b, 47). Genuine attention, she suggests, is more of a “negative effort” in which we “loosen up,” so as to allow our senses and mental energies to be absorbed and directed by the phenomena to which we are attending (1997b 48). While such attention relinquishes all expectations and takes “joy in the work,” it also must counter a deep-seated “evil” within us that resists earnest attention (1997b, 48, 49). We mitigate this evil, Weil says, each time that we concentrate fully on something, “not seeking anything, but ready to receive [the phenomenon before us] in its naked truth” (1977b, 49). Weil does not deny the inevitable influence on our thinking of received beliefs, but she advocates for a kind of “interplay,” as Code might describe it (2006, 44), between received beliefs and particular phenomena. As Weil explains, we hold our acquired knowledge “on a lower level,” as we focus with an open mind on the problem at hand, paying particular attention to errors in our own thinking (1977b, 49). Such attention not only tests received beliefs but yields “the virtue of humility,” which is “the right foundation” of all knowledge (Weil 1977b, 47).

Strikingly, for both Weil and Williams, the same earnest, patient, and humble attention that is central to wisdom is also paramount to ethical relationships. When we attend to others generously and without self-interested goals, both thinkers suggest, we face other\*s in their mystery and complexity, which is essential to good thinking but also creates relationships with those to whom we pay attention. Williams emphasizes the “joy of connection,” in those moments of contact when “time expands and we acknowledge what binds us together rather than separates us” (2012, 35). Like Williams, Weil also regards attention as a means to connecting with surrounding life, but Weil stresses the difficulty of paying attention to people who are suffering. Attention to people who are suffering, Weil says, compels us to open our imaginations and sensibilities to their plight and to consider our own vulnerability to losing everything that is vital to who we are. Rather than face such human and personal vulnerability, we more often turn away from people who are suffering and their cries are effectively mute: “They are like someone whose tongue has been cut out and who occasionally forgets the fact. When they move their lips no ear perceives any sound” (Weil 1977a, 332). Moreover, the afflicted, themselves, “soon sink into impotence in the use of language, because of the certainty of not being heard” (Weil 1977a, 333). In this situation, people who are suffering do not need pity or charity as much as they need “[i]ntense, pure, generous attention”; they need others to ask them “What are you going through?” (Weil 1977c, 33; 1977b, 51). As Weil explains, pity and charity treat their recipients from a distance and reduce them to specimens of “the unfortunate,” whereas generous attention faces people who are suffering as particular living beings, with whom we can have communicative relations, and thereby returns them to the human community.

The etymology of “attention” accords with Weil’s and Williams’ reflections. The Latin root of “attention, *tenir* means to hold. *Ad tenir* means to hold oneself to. Thus “attention” signifies connecting with, attaching to. It is the opposite of detachment. No wonder that Williams identifies paying attention with “honoring the connection that exists between all beings” and Weil calls “[t]he name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention. . .love” (1977a, 333). Like love, the attention that Weil and Williams describe involves a “meshing” of boundaries; it involves letting down our guard and relinquishing self-interested aims, so as to respond to the concrete reality of others and share what they are going through, including their suffering.

Interestingly, Weil believes that cultivating our powers of attention should be the primary task of schools. When schools train us to concentrate on complex problems, without regard for success or grades and with particular attention to our mistakes, this prepares us for the same kind of selfless and humble attention that is demanded by spiritual and ethical life. “[P]aradoxical as it may seem,” says Weil, “a Latin prose, or a geometry problem” require the same “kind of effort” from us as a person who is suffering; This effort is not mastery or definitive solutions but an approach that “is first of all attentive” (1977b, 51, 52).

**Attention as Antidote to Modern Dehumanization**

Weil suggests that the kind of attention she describes is particularly crucial in the context of dehumanizing modern institutions. With all their speed and efficiency, she warns, modern political, economic, and technological institutions have lost their grounding in human life and threaten to subordinate human existence to the demands of machines. Our social and political communities, for instance, have become large bureaucratic machines that reduce human thinking and action to the coordination and management of social machines. At the same time, our technologies and economic arrangements have turned us into “faithful, docile and conscientious worker[s]” who cede even our inner sense of individuality and dignity to mechanical processes, whose wheels spin independently of our conscious reflection (1997c, 30). As Weil puts it, our situation “resembles that of a party of absolutely ignorant travellers who find themselves in a motor-car launched at full speed and driverless across broken country” (1977c, 40).

Weil associates such mindless and dehumanizing lifestyles with ways of thinking that have sacrificed attentiveness to the living world to the imperatives of abstract symbols and formulas. In both professional and public life, she argues, dominant modes of thought have tended not only to abstract from the flux and enigmas of immediate experience, which is essential to thinking, but to reify abstract formulas and categories, treating the latter as if they were more real than the living phenomena from which they were abstracted. “[S]igns, words and algebraic formulas in the field of knowledge, money and credit symbols in economic life,” says Weil, “play the part of realities of which the actual things themselves constitute only the shadows” (1977c, 31). Such excessively abstract and formulaic modes of thought lose accountability to concrete existence, and thus offer little resistance against practices that destroy or violate existing life. Moreover, because the symbols and formulas that prevail in a society tend to follow the logic of established institutions, they are particularly oblivious to violence that is inflicted by those institutions. Thus, they offer little critical perspective on systemic violence and little empathy toward those who are “slowly crushed, ground down, and destroyed by the everyday workings of the social machine” (Weil 2003, 43).

The best antidote to such dehumanizing institutions and modes of thought, Weil suggests, is not an abstract morality but critical reflection that attends humbly and generously to particular phenomena. We can disrupt glib complacency with violence that has become routine in our society only by attending with our whole person to particular affairs and listening humbly to people outside of ruling institutions. Likewise, we can reconnect with our own human sensibilities and creative capacities only by “introduc[ing] a little play into the cogs of the machine,” “seiz[ing] every opportunity of awakening a little thought,” in effect, paying attention to any unexpected or unregulated phenomena, including our own somatic responses to the living world (Weil 1977c, 40). Granted, contemporary thinkers must give greater consideration to the ways that, attention, itself, is often mediated by ideological frameworks and implicit bias (Alcoff 2010; Merritt 2008). Still, Weil’s basic point remains compelling and, in a sense, offers one response to the effects of implicit bias on our attention: If we want to address meaningfully things are difficult to see and that our society has routinely overlooked, including complexities that defy ready-made solutions as well as systemic violence and marginalized subjectivities, then we need to do more than methodically analyze the world with a detached and formulaic logic. We need, rather, to attend humbly to particular phenomena and to create spaces and relationships that help us to connect with quieter and muffled voices.

**Academia and the Denigration of Attention**

The “generous attention” that Weil embraces as the hallmark of ethical and intellectual life is not normally considered a core epistemic virtue. On the contrary, attentive listening is “surprisingly unthought, undertheorized in epistemological analyses” (Code 2006, 234). Moreover, as I suggest below, humble attention is often explicitly denigrated in contemporary academic culture. Such depreciation of attention in knowledge-making institutions, I argue, is closely tied to the cultural biases that have denied recognition to a host of epistemic styles and agents. Thus a critical examination of the devaluing of attention can illuminate some of the obstacles to more pluralistic and vibrant intellectual communities.

Granted, orthodox epistemologies and classrooms have emphasized certain forms of attention. Empiricist epistemologies, in particular, have demanded meticulous attention to the objects of study; however, whereas Weil calls for an attention that connects with individuals and problems in their specificity and unpredictability, empiricist epistemologies have directed attention more narrowly toward calculable and fungible elements of the world, which have been abstracted from their context (Code 1995, 159-168). Schools, too, often have departed from the kind of attention advocated by Weil. On the one hand, many educators have been powerful advocates of open-minded attention to problems and people in all of their subtleties (Elbaz-Luwisch 2005, 41-46). On the other hand, howeve,r traditional classrooms as well as many aspects of formal education have emphasized a narrower kind of attention, in which students pay strict attention to teachers (Orr 1994). Such “lecture-hall” attention has affinities with Weil’s humble and receptive form of attention but also differs from the latter in significant ways: Whereas Weil describes an attention that is sensitive to muted and difficult-to-hear phenomena, lecture-hall attention focuses on voices that are already in the spotlight; whereas Weil’s attention humanizes and creates mutually receptive relationships with those to whom it is directed, lecture-hall attention remains subservient to an authority figure; and whereas Weil’s attention displaces hierarchies between passive listening and active knowing in an approach that joins humble receptivity with the height of wisdom, lecture-hall attention is mere subservient behavior that we hope to surpass, when we become the important ones who lecture at others.

The denigration of Weil’s humanizing form of attention in contemporary academic culture was made vivid for me in a recent encounter I had with a student. While meeting with a bright student to discuss some of her academic and personal concerns, the student explained to me that she was not discussing these matters with her advisor, because, as she put it, “he’s a very important scholar, very smart, and I don’t feel comfortable around him.” She added that this professor had been preoccupied whenever she met with him, and guided her wrong on classes for her major. But she understands, she said, because “he’s so important, he doesn’t have time for students.” I later asked her about the basis of her judgment that this faculty member was so smart and important. Her response betrayed some sarcasm as well as some frustrations with this person’s lack of accountability to students; however, her critical awareness of his uncaring behavior seemed not to extend to a critique of his alleged intellectual superiority. In her words:

In class, he lectures at us, about a lot of things we don’t know about and can’t question him on. He’s not interested in student opinions because he seems to know *everything*. He has a certain aura about him: intimidating; so you get the sense that he’s highly qualified. . . .When I meet with him, he’s always busy, often with his feet up on his desk and looking at the computer as I try to talk with him. By contrast, when I meet with you, you look at me and listen to me. I get the sense that you really care and are paying attention to what I’m saying. But, you see, that makes me think of you differently than I think of Dr. []. I think of Dr. [] as being really important.

Frustratingly, this is one of multiple encounters I have had with students in which students have attributed “expertise” and “smartness to certain faculty members by virtue of their pompousness, their tendency to lecture at students but not listen, and (in the words of another admiring student) their tendency to walk around campus in ways that are “judgmental and intimidating.” In effect, these students have identified “important scholars” precisely by their arrogance and lack of attentive listening while they have presumed that those of us who pay attention to others occupy a lesser status.

This perverse situation, in which a faculty member’s arrogance and *in*attention to others marks him as intellectually superior, has clear gender dimensions. “Attention” is gendered in our society insofar as gender ideologies and gender-stratified institutions have linked attentive behavior with women and, at the same time, have devalued such attentive behavior in relation to more individualistic, competitive, and directly productive behavior, which has been associated with men (Lloyd 1993, 74-104; Smith 1987, 81-85). For instance, while many female and male faculty members devote substantial time and energy to their students, studies have shown that students (even if subconsciously) expect from female teachers higher degrees of caring, generosity of time, and personal attention than they expect from male teachers. When female faculty members fail to meet students’ high expectations of female attentiveness, students evaluate those female teachers harshly, whereas they do not criticize male teachers under the same conditions (Koblitz 1990). At the same time, when female (or male) teachers devote substantial attention to their students, those teachers face additional setbacks; for, while such time and energy devoted to students is often personally rewarding, it usually adds to an already full workload and competes with the limited time and energy available for scholarship.

Perhaps most worrisome, the same gender ideologies that have led students to expect greater care and attention from female faculty members also bias students against caregivers as epistemic agents. This is because gender ideologies not only mark caring and attentiveness as “feminine” traits, while they mark more individualistic, productive, self-aggrandizing behavior as “masculine,” but they also construct epistemic authority in terms of these binaries, with the “masculine” traits signifying intellectual superiority (Cohn 1993, 228-231, 238; Lloyd 1993; Smith 1987, 19-36, 57-60, 60, 81-84). Moreover, when male instructors present themselves in a relaxed and engaging manner, this often increases student respect for them, whereas the same demeanor by female instructors (seemingly underscoring their feminine role) makes students more likely to challenge them (Merritt 2008, 266-67). Such gendered interpretations of attention leave female faculty members in a double-bind: If we fail to conform to students’ high expectations of feminine caring and attentiveness, then students evaluate our teaching harshly; however, if we do devote substantial attention to students, then (in addition to the time burden), we are interpreted as being less smart than our too-busy-for-students, aloof colleagues.

Thus, the denigration of attention in academia is bound up with an ensemble of cultural biases against “feminine” epistemic styles and agents. Feminist and decolonial theorists have analyzed the roots of such biases. Below, I review relevant feminist and decolonial insights and then address this analysis to the problem of attention; that is, the problem of how attention (in Weil’s sense) has come to be so opposed to common conceptions of good thinking.

**Historical Roots of Inattention**

If many of us in academia have found ourselves in a curious situation in which epistemic authority has been associated with *in*attention to others, then feminist and decolonial analysis can throw some light on this predicament. Feminist and decolonial critics have recognized modern epistemology’s legitimate concerns, including concerns to scrutinize prejudices, reflect on the foundations of our knowledge-making, and hold knowledge-claims accountable to the broader community. The critics have emphasized, however, that legitimate concerns for self-critical and publicly-accountable knowledge practices have been developed in contexts of patriarchal, capitalist, and colonialist power relations that have mystified the epistemic standpoint and styles of elite European men. In effect, modern power relations have enabled upper-class white men (or those who can pass as such) to present themselves as if they were certain, objective, and universal knowers. And such pretenses by suited white men to absolute epistemic authority have contributed, in both academic and popular culture, to an “exaggerated ideal of scientific knowledge making” (as Code put it) that has confused rigorous and accountable knowledge-making with appearances of certainty, universality, and objectivity. The latter are mere appearances because they have been achieved, not through actual transcendence of error, location, and bias, but through the power of some people to distribute their knowledge-claims widely, to impose their beliefs on the world, to shelter themselves from direct interaction with the problems they have studied, and to ignore or silence views that challenge their own.

For instance, decolonial theorists have traced the universalistic pretensions of European sciences and philosophies to colonialist relations of domination. In this account, the European conquest and colonization of other lands allowed colonial European men to take charge of classifying everything and everyone they encountered in the so-called New World, with complete disregard for the context in which those things had been situated and the perspective of the people classified. Such knowledge practices did not entail dialogue with others or attention and responsiveness to diverse modes of thought but only colonizers imposing their categories and methods on beings from whom they stood apart and to whom they denied any kinship. As “[i]ndigenous people were classified alongside the flora and fauna,” the colonialist thinkers “constituted other cultures, worlds, and persons as objects” while they cast themselves as objective authorities over those objects (Tuhiwei Smith 1999, 59; Dussel 1995, 34, 35). Moreover, as colonialist beliefs were distributed across oceans, such beliefs gained appearances of “‘universal’ knowledge” (Tuhiwei Smith 1999, 63). Colonial European claims to possess universal knowledge of history, law, and ethics were also maintained by their destruction of competing intellectual traditions; for instance, the early conquistadores destroyed temples, set fire to eight centuries of Mayan codices, and burned alive indigenous spiritual leaders (Galeano 1985, 137; Dussel 49-54). In turn, colonial European claims to intellectual superiority served to rationalize their rule over those categorized as “primitive” (Dussel 1995, 32-36, 63-67; Tuhiwei Smith 1999, 59-64).

Various forms of complicity between (presumed) epistemic authority and political domination have continued to the present day. For instance, some U.S. and European scholars have continued to presume authority to categorize subjugated people—from Algerians to Iraqis— as mentally and morally inferior and therefore rightly governed by Westerners (Fanon 1963, 298-301; Stone-Mediatore 2010, 35). And still today, U.S. and European universities and English-language publishing houses have dominated the global production of knowledge, which has helped to give knowledge produced in these institutions (especially knowledge presented in detached styles) cloaks of universality, while knowledge produced in other geographic regions, or knowledge in the U.S. and Europe that has embraced more socially situated epistemic styles, has been considered only “local,” “tradition,” “folklore,” and of lesser worth (Alcoff and Dalmiya 1993; Code 1995, 158; Harding 2008, 1-8, Mato 2011; Tuhiwei Smith 1999, 63-65).

In addition, the ability of more orthodox scholars, textbooks, and politicians to present Anglo-Eurocentric views of science and history as if they were universal has continued to rely on the sabotaging of other voices. Recently, for instance, the city of Tucson, Arizona responded to successful Raza Studies programs in local schools, which explored Mexican American standpoints on history and culture, by outlawing the discipline, firing teachers, and banning books associated with the curriculum (Rodriguez 2012). From a decolonial perspective, such efforts to destroy cultural and epistemic plurality always have laid beneath claims by Eurocentric knowledges to be “objective” and “universal.” In turn, so-called “objective” knowledges have been “undeniably also about power and domination” (Tuhiwei Smith 1999, 60).

Feminist theorists have addressed similar contradictions of “objective” knowledge within industrial societies. They have described, for instance, how the professionalization of knowledges from early modern Europe to the present has reserved knowledge-making for “highly credentialed experts,” who appear objective by virtue of their adherence to disciplinary codes, their distance from their subject matter, and their “conceptual mode” that “passes beyond the particular and immediate setting in which [thinkers are] always located” and beyond so-called “excessive particularity” to focus on “ready-made universals” (Pitter 2010, 186; Smith 1987, 82; Code 2006, 227, 228). Experts thus achieve certainty only by prioritizing abstract formulas over particular phenomena, as Weil described, with the effect of “superimposing a grid upon events, experiences, and situations, tucking in the bits that spill over the edges, letting putative aberrations drop through the cracks” (Code 2006, 280).[[2]](#endnote-2) According to this argument, expert “objectivity” also presupposes a division of labor in which technicians and staff-persons process particular phenomena, removing them from their context and transforming them into general types for the experts, while other people (usually women) care for the experts’ bodily needs. Such unrecognized labor helps experts to adhere to institutionalized ways of dividing up the world as well as to ignore their own bodily situatedness in the world (Code 2006, 227; Smith 1987, 52-84). Thus, feminist critics argue, norms of “professional distance,” “certainty,” and “objectivity” have mystified the perspective of privileged people, who can detach at will from bodily life and social problems, and likewise the perspective of managers, professionals, and “those whose professional business it is” to process people and problems through general procedures (Smith 1987, 63). In turn, when experts present themselves as objective and certain, they place their claims above public discussion and thereby insulate knowledge-production from public criticism (Code 2006, 228; Stone-Mediatore 2003, 61). Although feminist and non-traditional scholars increasingly have challenged this model of inquiry and have situated their work more explicitly in social experiences and community discussion, such challenges collide with what has passed as “objectivity.”

In light of feminist and decolonial critiques, common conceptions of epistemic rigor appear to represent only pretenses of rigor that are upheld by practices of *not* paying attention: not attending to the nuances of particular phenomena, to one’s own errors and limitations, to one’s own social and somatic ties to the world, to the plurality of perspectives on any issue, and to voices different than one’s own. Such critiques suggest, moreover, that these kinds of inattention are possible only for those who are unaccountable to others, those whose material needs are provided for by others, and those who can organize the world according to their own views. Common conceptions of epistemic authority thus follow a twist of logic similar to that of Plato’s Euthyphro. Not unlike Euthyphro, who confused the self-confidence that accompanies pretenses to wisdom with actual wisdom, the dominant culture has confused the political privilege of not paying attention to others with genuine epistemic authority. As Alcoff remarks, “epistemic reflexivity in European modernity [has been] less about putting one’s own belief on firm grounds, as the story of Descartes is endlessly taught, than about deflating all possible reasons to listen to the other” (2012, 4).

**The Dangers of Mystifying Inattention**

The prevailing tendency to confuse epistemic authority with *not* paying attention has created significant problems for the contemporary university, including the following. First, evaluation of faculty members is distorted. The efforts of some faculty members to honor student questions and opinions and to listen to voices from outside academia are under-appreciated. At the same time, practices of not paying attention to students and not paying attention to the broader community are tolerated or even mistaken for marks of intellectual superiority.

In addition, when we academics fail to appreciate the epistemic value of paying attention (in Weil’s sense), we overlook the wisdom of people who are not academically oriented but may have valuable insights to offer by virtue of their attentiveness to the living world. Williams, for instance, offers intriguing perspectives on the value of “being puzzled” and “learn[ing] how to listen,” and on the way that such forms of attention can reconnect us with surrounding life (2012, 35). And yet Williams avoids discussing these things in public “because the dominant culture views this kind of thinking as soft-headed and without intellectual rigor” (2012, 35). The dominant culture also undervalues people like Hladky, who by virtue of her personal ties to the war in Afghanistan, has been extremely attentive to the war’s irrationalities and human costs. Unlike leading pundits and academics, who, following neocolonial logics, have described recent U.S. military ventures as “moderniz[ing]. . .the Arab landscape” and “bringing order” and “democracy” to a “decaying” region, Hladky and other military family-members have been moved by their social and emotional closeness to war to face discomfiting contradictions in U.S. policy. They have explored such contradictions even in the face of cognitive dissonance and community ostracization.[[3]](#endnote-3) And yet, when I first proposed a panel of military-family activists as guest speakers, a colleague refused to support the event, dismissing the speakers as “not academically oriented.” Like my closed-minded colleague, the university that clings to conventional academic norms forgoes the opportunity to learn from activists and practitioners, who might teach us something important about the world that disciplined-constrained and detached academics have overlooked. Ironically, many universities have sought to link classrooms with the outside world, for instance, through internships, service-learning, and practice-oriented programs; however, their pursuits remain inadequate to “the breadth of concerns and inter-connectivity” of real-life issues (Pitter 2010, 185), so long as they fail to value a greater plurality of epistemic styles and agents, including humbly attentive styles as well as citizen-activists with “non-academic” relations to the world.

Finally, when our epistemic norms overlook the value of attentiveness and mystify inattentiveness, many students and scholars (like Plato’s Euthyphro) become more concerned with appearing all-knowing than with attending to phenomena that might challenge their familiar beliefs. They consequently put little effort into examining their errors, facing mysterious or discomfiting phenomena, listening humbly to quiet voices, or cultivating ties to other beings, all of which both Weil and Williams identify as central to thinking well. The resulting rigid and self-certain knowledge-practices contradict not only Weil’s account of wisdom but the critical spirit of modern epistemic norms.

**Attention and Epistemic Pluralism**

Weil’s concept of paying attention offers a framework for shifting epistemic practices in less rigid, more community-anchored, and more pluralist direction. In light of Weil’s account of attention, undervalued epistemic modes—for instance, focusing on particulars, honoring puzzlement, caring about the problems we study, and engaging with the world fully and passionately--are not embraced uncritically. Such modes of knowing are valued in each situation, however, insofar as they promote attention to our errors and to the subtleties, complexities, and interconnections of particular phenomena.

For instance, an epistemic framework that affirmed attentiveness as a guiding norm would neither reject nor embrace all emotion-informed thinking but would examine the effects of particular emotions on people’s attentiveness in specific contexts. Such a framework would allow us to appreciate, for instance, how love for their kin in the military has moved Hladky and fellow military-family activists to pay greater attention to unsettling contradictions of U.S. policy and to broaden their viewpoints and sense of community, sometimes asking “what are you going through” to families in Iraq.[[4]](#endnote-4) A Weil-inspired framework would allow us to distinguish such attention-enhancing and bridge-building emotions from attention-detracting emotions. In the context of war, examples of the latter include love for one’s comrades that is expressed as reckless rage and hatred toward an abstract enemy, exulting in one’s military strength, or taking pride in “empty-word” battle slogans.[[5]](#endnote-5) In a Weil-inspired framework, these latter instances are problematic not because they fuse thinking with emotion but because, in these cases, the emotions promote conformity to preconceived formulas while they detract attention from complicated realities and from the links among all living beings.

In this account, attention and care work jointly with one other and with other elements of epistemic rigor. On one level, for instance, emotionally-infused care about an issue can motivate us to attend carefully to difficult phenomena. Such care-invested attention supports the original aims of empiricism but also affirms the role that personal engagement can play in advancing those aims, especially when the subject matter is complicated, disturbing, or ignored by the dominant culture. For instance, as Hladky suggests, only when we have “skin in the fight,” will we pay attention to the human destruction of no-longer-televised wars. At the same time, as indicated above, having “skin in the fight” can sometimes narrow our thinking and lead us to shut out other viewpoints. In such cases, Weil’s humble and error-sensitive form of paying attention provides one important form of resistance to such thought-restricting expressions of emotion. When we practice humble and patient attention to human affairs, our emotional ties to the issues are less likely to fixate on empty slogans or demonize abstract others and more likely to sensitize us to a greater array of phenomena and viewpoints, thus prompting richer and more balanced thinking. For instance, Vietnam veteran and self-declared “card-carrying-Republican,” Robert Hanafin, has had strong personal ties to the military. However, when he paid careful attention to who sacrifices and who benefits from the Iraq war, his attention together with his care for the military led him to find common cause with “peaceniks” and to pursue counter-recruitment activism, through which he has provided young people with “a more balanced view” of military service (Hanafin, cited in Stone-Mediatore 2006). Hanafin demonstrates how personally engaged care and attention need not replace empirical or analytical reasoning but can work with them to support error-sensitive thinking about complexities, unexpected interconnections, and things difficult to see.

A Weil-inspired epistemic framework would also expose the intellectual limitations and, ultimately, the damage to our intellectual communities of currently privileged epistemic styles. If the dominant culture tends to privilege thinkers who detach emotionally from their subject matter, dominate their interlocutors, and exude self-confidence, a Weil-inspired framework reminds us that self-certain thinkers are not as likely as tentative thinkers to attend to their errors or encourage quieter voices to express themselves. Such a framework also highlights the limitations of detached thinkers, who are less likely than thinkers who care about their subject matter to attend to thorny and subtle details. A concern for attentiveness also throws critical light on academia’s popular combative style; for scholars who try to demolish their interlocutors rarely pay earnest attention to those whom they demolish. By contrast, when the philosopher Hidé Ishiguro, according to one of her students, eschewed the ruling combative mode and “pa[id] full attention to what we said,” she not only nurtured students’ insights but encouraged students to pay attention to one another. Such respectfully attentive academic atmospheres can help to make philosophy more “gender friendly,” and thus enriched by a greater plurality of people and styles (Wolff 2013).

Finally, when we affirm attentiveness (in Weil’s sense) as a guiding epistemic norm, we affirm the kinship between thinking well and living well. If, as Weil claims, both “affliction and truth need the same kind of [humble, generous] attention before they can be heard” (1977, 333), then truth-seeking is an ineluctably ethical activity, not only because it can shed light on overlooked social problems but because it develops in us the same kind of attentiveness by which we connect with other beings and bring them into our moral community. In this account, when our knowledge-practices are attentive, they serve both truth and ethical relationships; however, when they are hasty and inattentive, they are not only error-prone but alienate us from surrounding life.

Granted, when we embrace paying attention as a guiding epistemic norm, this also raises tough questions. For instance, how can we transform common practices of rote and unreflective attention into the more subtle and error-sensitive attention advocated by Weil? How can we promote greater attention to people and problems that have been routinely overlooked, especially when such attention is emotionally and cognitively unsettling? And how do we decide what most deserves our attention? Such questions are challenging, but simply raising them can shift epistemology in productive directions. For instance, such questions provoke us to venture beyond academic boundaries and to consider what we might learn about meaningful attention from citizen-activists, like Hladky and Hanafin, who have promoted attention to commonly overlooked contradictions. They also compel us to recognize the politics of our epistemic practices, insofar as such practices always direct attention to some things and not others. Ultimately, an epistemic framework that prioritized Weil’s concept of paying attention might help shift academic culture away from concerns such as “how do we gain certainty and mastery?” and towards concerns centered on how we can cultivate the plurality of epistemic virtues and engage the plurality of epistemic voices that we need in order to attend well to our world.

NOTES

1. I presented early versions of this research at the Saint Louis University Women’s Studies Program Mellon-Grant Lectures Series (2013) and the 2013 FEAST conference. I thank Penny Weiss for encouraging me to pursue this research and John Stone-Mediatore, Jean Keller, and Bonnie Mann for insightful criticism on earlier drafts of this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Lest this seem hyperbolic, I offer two examples from my own experience. In an undergraduate political science class at the University of Michigan, an assignment required that we illustrate a theory we were studying by applying the theory to a contemporary political issue. When I explained to my instructor that the issue I happened to select had various incongruencies with the theory, he responded “choose another issue.” More recently, at an economic student’s honors defense, the student began with the premise that access to health-care, quality of health-care, and low cost of health-care were in such a relationship that enhancing any two could only be at the expense of the third. Following the student’s presentation, I praised the research but questioned the initial premise, observing that some of the student’s *own examples* of women’s health-care and preventative health-care enhanced all three variables. The chair of the defense interjected, “You don’t understand,” he said. “It’s an *economic principle*, so it can’t be questioned.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The quoted phrases are from Fouad Ajami and Michael Ignatieff, cited in Stone-Mediatore (2010, 35). In that essay, I examine in greater detail the limitations that are systemic to “expert” thinking as well as the ways that some military-family activists have drawn on their social and emotional ties to war to think more deeply and critically about recent wars. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a more detailed discussion of how specific military-family activists developed these more attentive and broad-minded modes of thinking, see Stone-Mediatore (2010, 38-41). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. These examples of ethically and intellectually problematic expressions of emotion are from Frank (1971, 459), Gray (1998, 139), Cohn (1993, 241-42), and Weil (1977d).

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