# A Study of Character:
# Simone Weil's Psychological and Ethical Attention

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**Abstract**: In the later, ethically oriented writings of the philosopher Simone Weil, she develops her concept of attention. This involves using the body to train the mind and thus the soul, into an open, receptive state. This state is the first condition for any ethical action to take place. This article explores how Weil's account of attention can provide a new perspective in philosophical and theological engagement with psychology, first in terms of moral psychology and virtue ethics, and second in statements on the malleability or plasticity of human nature. As Weil sees that human nature's stress on activity tends to lead to suffering rather than ethical action, she proposes not ethical action *per se*, but an ethical attitude of attention instead. Habit-formation and character development can thus be approached differently as cultivating a state of openness rather than of particular virtues. This article will therefore explore the relationship of theology and psychology in terms of human nature as irremediably situated but also psychologically receptive for restoration.

**Keywords:** Virtue ethics, Moral psychology, Simone Weil, Theological anthropology

## 1. Introduction

Psychological studies on skill mastery have shown that after 10,000 hours of practice, people are able to attain fluency in a skill, and from that, genuine expertise can develop. This so called 10,000 rule is often brought into discussions on the development of habits; at 10,000 hours, a task stops being an effort and becomes second nature.[1] This rule is of relevance to certain ethical theories and

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[1] This rule was popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers: The Story of Success*. He uses the example of the Beatles in Hamburg in the book, but the original 1993 study by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer concerned violinists.

to discussions of human nature. Ethical theories have to work with human nature, whichever account of human nature they assume or understand, and psychology can be used to either affirm or deny these accounts of human nature. The argument here is that if one is able to practice empathy, compassion, or honesty the way one develops a habit, then 10,000 hours later, moral accomplishment, if not expertise, appears achievable. This engagement between certain philosophical theories and psychological findings is then of particular relevance to virtue ethics. The claims of both psychology regarding habit formation and virtue ethics concerning character can be used to set out a roadmap to virtuous action.

There are also other productive implications of this dialogue between psychology and morality. Psychology can, as the 10,000 rule suggests, be mined for statements on human nature: its base level, the extent to which we can change our nature, and the way in which habit formation evidences that. Yet it is here that we perhaps come to the greatest difference between picking up a habit and acting virtuously. I may be able to develop habits and expertise through practice, but there is a fundamental difference between my historically variable ability to play the piano and having to act virtuously in a particular situation. How can someone develop virtues outside of the particular situations that call for it?

This is a live debate in moral psychology on the use and validity of virtue ethics and its attendant concepts of character and habit. The discussion revolves around why, how, and whether humans can consistently act ethically. If morality can be developed in the same way that I once managed to cultivate performing *Clair de Lune*, then we should be able to observe moral excellence and progress. As I shall explore, various psychological experiments have called that into question. These findings suggest that it is situation that determines moral action rather than developed character and disposition. The debates in recent years have been codifying into the area of character studies. These debates provide a particularly helpful way in which to consider a thinker whose thought touches on many of these debates. However, her own thought posits a different perspective and approach to that found in the debates on character studies.

This article will argue that the concept of attention in Simone Weil, as fundamentally theological in its orientation towards God, provides a new perspective. Whilst morally Weil counts more as an exception than as exemplar, her thought posits and explores the concept of attention as something that can be cultivated naturalistically. Yet this naturalistic cultivation has supernatural ends, and her programme is thus open to psychological and theological use and interpretation. Attention involves the cultivation of habit and the creation of a character, but rather than specific virtues, certain traits are developed as a stance rather than as a habit. Her goal is to specifically develop an openness to grace rather than a privileging of effort that then transforms into habit. Weil's scheme

can therefore be used to navigate the issues raised by the situationists in the character debate. Her thought can also be supported by recent work on human nature as malleable and open to the divine. This article will follow these conversations in moral psychology concerning character, but seek, in dialogue with other aspects of the conversation between psychology and theology, to explore different questions around a different model of character and human nature.

## 2. Questions of Character

One point at which philosophy and psychology have met concerns virtue ethics and character. Virtue is, in this scheme, a matter of habit and practice rather than a matter of duty or of calculating the consequences. In Aristotle's account of ethics, the goal is happiness found in moderation and through our habitual practice of virtue, we develop a certain character (Aristotle *NE* III 2 1112a2f). This character entails that when we act in certain situations, we should tend towards acting in the way that we have habituated ourselves to. Ethics is thus concerned with forming character, and from that character we can respond appropriately in the situations in which we find ourselves. Virtue also strives towards the mean, shunning either excess or lack, where in developing the virtue of bravery one seeks to avoid recklessness or cowardice. Human nature is presented as rational, trainable, and malleable, with a will of a certain power, although Aristotle also explores the problem of *akrasia*, our weakness of will and our inability to carry out virtuous action. Virtue ethics strives to form a character that can choose to act for the good, feel good about doing so, desire to do so, and react appropriately in a variety of situations. Hence, for the person who has cultivated honesty, they can be expected to be honest in most, if not all, situations.[2]

This is a point on which moral psychology and philosophical and theological ethics could meld. However, there is a debate worth exploring here as to the suitability of virtue ethics to philosophy and by extension, theology. It is a debate that explicitly engages with psychological science, and is one of the largest debates within moral psychology (apart from free will and determinism). Though there has been ample work that explores the formation and building of character psychologically, there is also a strong challenge to these attempts. This argument is fundamentally that character is not a firm guarantee of moral and ethical behavior, if character even exists at all.[3] The arguments against character

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[2] This is termed a global trait. Whereas if one had the local trait of honesty, one would not plagiarise an article but might lie to one's partner about one's whereabouts.

[3] Both thinkers discussed below are described as character skeptics. However both in fact emphasise that although they do not doubt that there is such a thing as character, it lacks empirical weight in discussions of ethics.

tend to draw upon a particular set of experiments that demonstrate how various social contexts seem to powerfully impact individual judgment and character. The most famous in this line of research are the Milgram Obedience Experiments (1974) and the Good Samaritan Experiment (Darley and Batson 1973). The former purported to show that at the request of someone in authority subjects, would continuously electrically shock victims, even up to potentially fatal levels. The second showed that what determined whether someone would stop and help a person in distress was how much of a hurry they were in. What could be, and has been, concluded from these sorts of experiments is that "manipulations of the immediate social situation can overwhelm in importance the type of individual differences in personal traits or dispositions that people normally think of as being determinative of social behavior" (Ross and Nisbett 1991, 14). The argument is that character does not determine action, but instead situation. This is especially the case if the situation is engineered such that one group is clearly the "outgroup" (Asche, 1951). If there is character, it is likely to be overwhelmed by the immediate social situation that an actor finds themselves in.

A subsequent key study on the apparent situational nature of character was the Stanford Prison Study (Zimbardo 2007) in which what appeared to determine one's behavior towards another was the role they occupied, prisoner or guard. The cumulative case from these social psychological experiments is that character is not the guarantee of one's endorsed ethics: instead, it is situation. Although there are concerns raised about the studies, they do present a challenge to virtue ethics and its account of character. This challenge is raised and explored in particular by Harman (1999) and Doris (2002). Their objections evince the complexity of bringing empirical sciences to bear on philosophical theories.

Harman (1999) argues that a "fundamental attribution error" occurs in ascribing more responsibility to the agent's character than to their situational behavior. The fundamental attribution error (or correspondence bias) is where someone will over-emphasize character or disposition to explain the behavior of others and under-emphasize the importance of situation. If someone is late, it is taken as evidence of their fundamental character rather than being due to a particular situation (weather, train strikes, etc.). Ross (1977) argues that this often undergirds social psychology: we see the faults of others as evidence of their character, but our own as situational. However, Miller (1984) notes that these findings may be culturally dependent.

In Harman's argument, he does not deny character but rather sees that there is no empirical basis for character traits. Our use of them is often a recourse to "folk morality." Instead he argues that the motivating factor in the participants' actions is situation, and overlooking or ascribing this to character is dangerous. It means we often look to character at the expense of the situation, whereas if we were to focus on situation rather than character, we may find ourselves

responding more tolerantly. We may implement situational changes that have better moral results than focusing on cultivating character and particular character traits. He takes a stronger line later, stating that empirically, it cannot be said that people differ in character traits. Instead, they 'differ in their situations and in their perceptions of their situations' (Harman 2000, 329).

Doris (2002) is more cautious, arguing that character does not suffice for moral action. He notes that if one were to argue for the truth of virtue ethics as regards human nature, then a globalist account of character must display consistency and stability in the manifestation of traits. Instead, drawing on these experiments, he details first that where there has been observation of behavior, it has not revealed any consistency. Through this observation we can state that behavior cannot be said to be governed by virtue. Second, these observations have shown that situation has more explanatory power for behavior than character. Indeed, character itself can be observed to be dependent on situation more than on the cultivation of virtue and the pursuit of the good.

There are several counters to the situationist or character skeptic position, as it has been termed. Appiah argues that virtues should not be expected to be consistently observed in behavior. Instead, they exist as ideals that shape our behavior. This is not to say they are impossible ideals, for even if they are difficult to enact and attain, "difficult is not the same as impossible; and perhaps we can ascend the gradient of these virtues through aspiring to the full-fledged ideal" (Appiah 2008, 49). A similar perspective is advanced by Kupperman, that virtue ethics is useful in the face of such experiments to underscore that "it is possible through reflection and self-discipline for someone to do a good deal better than the norm (Kupperman 2009, 254). Both Adams and Kamtekar argue that there is perhaps another attribution error where these discussions of psychological processes are divorced from the tenor of rational life (Adams 2006, 115–232, Kamtekar 2004). The lack of consistency in behavior is perhaps evidence of character responding appropriately to particular situations, or of a lack of continence, a possibility itself that was not discounted by Aristotle (Upton 2009, 103–4). This reticence regarding the ability of humanity to truly actualize the virtuous life in response to particular situations is emphasized by Badhwar. She argues in her response to the criticisms by the situationists that virtue ethics can continue to helpfully illustrate human nature in relation to virtue and character. The position that Doris's work, and the experiments describe, in fact detail the *akratic* aspect of humanity, as weak-willed. They do not show that humanity is incapable of virtue, global or otherwise, but demonstrate that "our *akrasia* is far more easily evoked and takes many more forms than Aristotle or anyone else envisaged" (Badhwar 2009, 262).

Other scholars are also keen to preserve character as helpful. Solomon notes that whilst these objections to character are often well founded and rest on

admirable concerns, tearing down the structure is perhaps not as beneficial as they argue. Even though character is clearly vulnerable to environment 'it is also a bulwark *against* environment' (Solomon 2005, 651). This is supported by work on the idea of personality traits. Traits that are linked to virtue, such as agreeableness and conscientiousness, are shown to develop positively with maturation, suggesting that there is a chance they can also be cultivated (Roberts, Walton, Viechtbauer 2006). Miller's engagement with Harman and Doris's work argues that they have not truly disproved that subjects have not attained local or global character traits. In these extreme situations we are perhaps observing someone whose "character is not fully developed to the point at which he can stand up to certain particularly difficult circumstances" (Miller 2003, 388).

Miller has continued to engage with the questions raised by social psychology, and develops his account of mixed traits, in which most people are characterized as having neither virtues or vices, but robust character traits that can give rise to moral intent and action (Miller 2013). Miller sees that this model is particularly fruitful for interdisciplinary work, occupying a medium ground between holding that all people possess unrealized moral traits and that behavior is predominantly situational. Pertinently for this discussion, Miller sees that his framework enables virtues to be cultivated, and advocates for a multi-pronged approach, seeing no single solution as adequate. Thus, Miller sees that recourse to role models, in real life and through literature, alongside an increase in the salience of moral norms, self-examination, and selection of situations, can all be productive for moral cultivation (Miller 2014). He also argues that the particular relationship to God found in Christianity can offer another strategy for moral improvement and education. God's character, as perfectly loving, just, and honest, is such that in loving God we strive to emulate that character. Christians are further mandated to emulate the perfectly virtuous character of Christ, even if it is an impossible task. That gratitude the Christian feels towards God also motivates their ideal moral response. This is reinforced through rituals that emphasize these aspects of God and our response to them (Miller 2018). Miller's work engages with other aspects of moral self-improvement, both secular and divine, but it is this response of cultivating character that is pertinent to the forthcoming discussion.

From this particular mediation of psychology and philosophy, there are some tentative conclusions that we can work with. First, is that it is unwise to speak of human nature, and even human behavior, without attention to both the internal workings and reasons of the person and the situations in which they find themselves. Second, is that although talk of developing of character may be fraught, it is not impossible. It has not been ruled out by these psychological experiments and their empirical findings. Finally, any theological response that seeks to engage with virtue ethics and moral psychology should be attentive to

both the capacity of humanity and the failures of humanity. Even if the implications of psychological experiments and their empirical findings can be debated, they certainly open up questions and concerns about human nature and human action.

From this discussion, it can further be observed that the inter-relation of ethical theories and moral psychology tends to proceed from an understanding of the everyday and the ordinary. It focuses on the ordinary persons, sometimes in ordinary and other times in extraordinary situations, and aims to draw conclusions that reflect what is possible for most people. This position is why, as Bernard Williams argues, ethical theories should reflect what it possible for most people. Ethical schemes that promote life projects or commitments that are contrary to normal human lives are unlucky to take root in and vivify actual, normal human lives (Williams 1985). This is reflected in Miller's work; although he notes extreme exemplars, in his own positive program for the cultivation of virtue he focuses on projects and commitments that are fundamentally achievable. Furthermore, the religious aspect of it is structured predominantly around the relationship to a morally perfect God and the example of Christ.

In the following section of this article, I will be exploring an example that is deeply contrary to Williams's argument. In many ways, the extremity of her moral life means that she could be considered an anti-exemplar, as much of her life is either impossible to imitate, or imitation of it would be extremely ill-advised. Yet despite the impossibility of imitation, Simone Weil provides her own roadmap of habit. This guidance is not found in the practicing of character traits, but instead in cultivating an openness through the eradication of character and personality. Her thought can thus bridge discussions of character and habit formation with that of discussions of human nature. Her roadmap will be shown to not be subject to the criticisms of the situationists, as she engages fully with human nature in its situatedness, but she also does not promise more than can be fulfilled by human nature. Ironically, it is through exploration of an impossible moral exemplar that steps towards an achievable moral response can be taken.

Her roadmap is theological in that the discussion of character and its possible propensity to virtue concerns first and foremost the relationship and receptivity to God rather than a programmatic focus on human will, effort, and endeavor. Thus, while much of the debate around character, virtue, and behavior has focused on the situations and characters of ordinary people, at times in exceptional circumstances, we now turn to an exceptional figure in a number of exceptionable circumstances, and to one who comes to a particular paradoxical solution regarding character: to cultivate its disappearance.

### 3. Simone Weil: The Impossible Exemplar

It is customary to introduce Simone Weil with an account of her deeply, consistently, self-sacrificial nature. This manifested both healthily, in her concern for others and also deeply unhealthily, in contributing to her early death.[4] Examples of it range from her childhood refusal of sugar in solidarity with soldiers in the First World War, when as a student at the prestigious *École normale supérieure* she engaged in strikes in supports of workers, and when, as a teacher in Le Puy she took a sabbatical and worked in factories in order to fully understand the conditions and experience of life in them. Despite her then-pacifism she joined the Republican fight in the Spanish civil war, often volunteering herself for missions that she was not capable of completing successfully. Under the Vichy government, as a Jewish woman her license to teach was revoked, and despite managing to leave France with her family for America, she returned to London to work for the Resistance. She worked for the Free French Press, writing texts that she hoped would form a program for a just society that promoted human flourishing, as well as plans to return to France by being parachuted in, along with nurses, to help soldiers on the front line. Her understanding of human life and effort is thus formed in the face and full knowledge of uncompromising and untenable situations, and of impossible choices.

Simone Weil is often counted as a Christian mystic. Having been raised in a secular environment, Weil came to Christianity through a series of mystical encounters. The first was the conviction she felt when watching a procession in Portugal honoring the patron saint of the fishing villagers. She felt that "Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I amongst others" (Weil 1951, 26). Her second encounter was during a visit to the chapel where St. Francis had prayed, where "something stronger than I compelled me for the first time to go down on my knees" (*ibid*). Her third contact was during her visit to the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes during Holy Week. Having suffered from horrific headaches, she found in the Gregorian chant there "the possibility of living divine love in the midst of affliction" (ibid). She was also introduced to the religious poetry of George Herbert there. She related that when reciting his poem "Love" in the midst of these headaches, she found relief from them and the experience of Christ's presence, that "Christ himself came down and took possession of me" (*ibid*, 27). Her engagement with Christianity reflects that experiential transformation and

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[4] The report is that she refused to eat more than the rations given to prisoners of war, and thus deeply inhibited her recovery from an attack of tuberculosis. The coroner report states that "the deceased did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed" (McLellan 1990, 266).

passivity, and it is often argued that her thought dramatically shifts after these religious experiences in the late 1930s. However, it is worth briefly noting her reflections on factory life here, as this analysis of human nature and human existence is illustrative for her later account of habit formation and its limits, and it explores her understanding of the effect of situation upon human action.

In 1934 she took leave from her teaching position and worked in two factories. Life in the factories was, she saw, dominated by exhaustion, alienation, and servitude. Due to the pace of the work and the constant demand for output one must enter into a state of complete submission to the work and the conditions. During her experiences, the independence of her as a thinking, autonomous, freely choosing subject, with an ability to discern, and determine was eroded. She writes of coming to realize her utter dependence on circumstances as the independence of her thought and character were worn down, where "all that would be needed is for circumstances someday to force me to work at a job without a weekly rest – which after all is always possible – and I would become a beast of burden, docile and resigned.' (Weil 1987, 171). Yet she finds aspects of this experience helpful, writing that she should not lose the feeling "that I do not possess any right whatever, of any kind." She saw that she gained from this time "the ability to be morally self-sufficient, to live in this state of constant latent humiliation without feeling humiliated in my own eyes; to savor intensely every moment of freedom or camaraderie, as if it would last forever." This was "a direct contact with life" (*ibid*, 225)

Weil sees that situations will tend to master us, that "an obviously inexorable and invincible form of oppression does not engender revolt as an immediate reaction, but submission' (226). It is this that led to her seeing that Christianity provides

> a conception of affliction that could acknowledge the moral centrality of suffering without promising a vision of the human agent as free to break through the structures which bring suffering about. It was from within a reformulated Christianity that Weil discovered a language that could begin to illuminate the truth of factory work. (Blum and Seidler 1989, 187)

Weil's ethics will thus navigate human situations and behavior in reaction to these situations in a particular way. She is attentive to human will as unable to fundamentally shift and alter the environment and to many extents itself: in her language humanity is ruled over by force. Force can be described as an *akrasia* writ large, something which constantly frustrates our efforts, where "our personality is entirely dependent on external circumstances which have unlimited power to crush it. But we would rather die than admit this" (Weil 1951, 149).

Whilst human nature is at heart creative and active, it is limited by the natural environment, by social groups, and the organized natural environment, including methods of work.[5] There is a fundamental tension between human nature and human existence where we constantly push up against our boundaries. Weil's response is twofold: akin to Appiah, she sees that we must hold ethical ideals even if they are unrealizable;[6] and as our actions are ever subject to force, we must move towards a state of obligated non-action, or attention. She starts with this understanding of humanity as *akratic*, where we seek to turn our attention away quickly rather than focusing on one thing in particular at a time. It is through the training of *attention* that ethics becomes possible, rather than the training of particular positive virtues. Attention, instead, must be trained: not as an active effort but as a sustained passive state. As for Solomon, for Weil character is important as a bulwark against situations, but for her it has to be a negatively conceived character, an impersonal, open one, rather than one that cultivates particular positive virtues.

This brings us to Weil's understanding of attention. Although attention is a well-discussed psychological phenomenon,[7] Weil's understanding is different. It is less a form of processing and more linked to a self-control towards a state of openness. Attention is not pure effort or power of the will nor is it complete inactivity or inertia, but a state of waiting for God, "not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it" (Weil 1951, 21). As a state, it bears some similarities to the findings of McCullough and Willoughby (2009). They have argued that certain benefits linked with religiosity, such as health, well-being, and social behavior, may be related to the importance and development of self-control in religion. Religion promotes self-control and self-regulation and sets and influences the goals that humans are to pursue. In Weil's scheme, we are to develop a particular, self-controlled posture that is able to withstand the vicissitudes of our situatedness.

One of the results, Weil sees, of the development of attention is to go beyond our first impressions of a person and recognize our responsibility and obligation to each individual. We are then able to uphold this responsibility towards them

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[5] Humans are "essentially active beings and have a faculty of self-determination which they can never renounce, even should they so desire" (Weil 2001, 64).

[6] She writes, for instance, that "perfect liberty is what we must try to represent clearly to ourselves, not in the hope of attaining it, but in the hope of attaining a less imperfect liberty than is our present condition; for the better can be conceived only by reference to the perfect. One can only steer towards an ideal. The ideal is just as unattainable as the dream" (Weil 2001, 79).

[7] These debates take their cue from William James's comment that attention is "the taking possession by the mind, in clear, and vivid form, of one out of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought," which "implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others" (James 1890). It is often linked to meditation and mindfulness. The concepts presented here at times resemble these practices, but they are different in scope and end.

and their vital needs.[8] Found most programmatically in her essay 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God', Weil develops attention as a discipline towards impersonality and openness. This development of character is akin to particular Stoic exercises which, as Pierre Hadot notes, were 'designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom' (Hadot 1995, 59). In that state of attention, *prosoche*, the self is transformed: it dies to its '*individuality and passions*, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity' (Hadot 1995, 95).

Weil's attention reflects this end: it is a training, a discipline that removes focus from the self. It focuses on making passivity a key ground of ethics.[9] It moves attention away from being defined by activity towards being an attitude or a mental posture. The practice of attention enables the self to be open to those who are in need and to God. Weil's account of attention is developed around knowledge and awareness of God: it is a prayer, which is total focus on and obedience to God.[10] Weil's insight is that any kind of attention develops this self-control. It does not have to be focused initially on God or on the person to whom we are obligated, but is built up through lower kinds of attention, such as that required for understanding geometry or Latin. These repetitive, dull, often thankless tasks may seem futile, but akin to the 10,000 rule, they contribute to this deeper state of attention.[11]

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[8] In Weil, our obligation to the other arises out of our sacred duty towards them to prevent their suffering. See the essay "La Personne et la sacré" written to counter Jacques Maritain's account of the self in The Rights of Man and Natural Law. Maritain's Personalism focuses on the personality as constituting the particular metaphysical centre of the person which grounds the rights of the individual. In contrast to this, Weil sees that personality and thus the personal is of limited importance, not least as it is that which is given to us and subject to the machinations of force. It is the impersonality, the wholeness of one as a person or a human being, that is the key concern. Weil illustrates this in a striking manner by asking what exactly stops her from poking out the eye of a man on the street, as "if the human personality were what is sacred for me, I could easily put out his eyes. Once he was blind, he would still have a personality" (Weil 2015, 104). Instead, it is the prevention of suffering that stops us doing so, that is not dependent on the personality, but something deeper than that. In *The Need for Roots* the vital needs of the person are order and liberty; obedience and responsibility; equality and hierarchism; honour and punishment; freedom of opinion, security, and risk; private and collective property; and finally, truth.

[9] This aspect of Weil's ethics attracted Iris Murdoch, who found that many modern ethicists were suspicious of passivity. "The man" of modern moral philosophy is the one for whom good is always chosen, as the "will is pure choice, pure movement, and not thought or vision," it "really requires only action words" (Murdoch 1970, 8).

[10] Prayer is "the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God" (Weil 1951, 57).

[11] This may seem at risk of learned helplessness, but Weil is keen on stressing that the practice itself builds up and allows for progress. "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

She writes that they develop a particular, self-controlled passivity. When we engage in translation work, we must be passive: when waiting "for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen…we merely reject all inadequate words" (*ibid*, 113). This she sees as preparation for our openness towards others and the capability for the right action towards others. She uses the example of the useless efforts of the *Curé d'Ars* to master Latin. These unsuccessful attempts to master Latin "bore fruit in the marvellous discernment that enabled him to see the very soul of his penitents behind their words and even their silences" (*ibid*, 108). We do not and certainly should not desire to improve aspects of our character or various traits through an effort of the will, as that only builds up our own sense of self. Instead "attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of" (*ibid*, 62). Attention enables us not only to turn the gaze away from ourselves, but turn it towards "that which cannot be conceived" (Weil 1956, 1:179). Attention thus is that which "seizes hold of reality, so that the greater the attention on the part of the mind, the greater the amount of real being in the object' (*ibid*, 2:527). This attention, focused on studies and then on God, develops into an ethical stance. The nearer we are to God, and the more impersonal we are, the more love we are able to have for our neighbor.

Bringing Weil to bear on the debate in character studies allows for some intriguing angles. Weil's understanding of human nature and existence is pessimistic beyond the worst Stanford Prison Experimenter, and her thought thus far appears to rule out the ability to change one's character in such a situation. Yet Weil *does* seek to change our character. She seeks to develop, through self-control and self-regulation, a certain sustained passive impersonality. This is openness to grace. It is this character that can act as a bulwark against situation. This openness and intended receptivity to grace is then the first stage of our ability to be able to act ethically towards others. Indeed, it is the idea of personality and character that detracts from ethical action. She reflects that

> The principal claim we think we have on the universe is that our personality should continue. This claim implies all the others. The instinct of self-preservation makes us feel this continuation to be a necessity, and we believe that a necessity is a right. We are like the beggar who said to Talleyrand: "Sir, I

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" (Weil 1951, 34)

must live," and to whom Talleyrand replied, "I do not see the necessity for that." (Weil, 1951, 223–4)

Thus, the accounts of character formation we have explored previously start, for Weil, on the wrong foot. They all seek to build up the self, the I, rather than seeing the self and the I as the problem in ethical action. Countering this desire to build up the personality as that which must act is what can and should be cultivated, habituated, and desired in human nature, and it is something that Weil sees as psychologically possible. Cameron's analysis of Weil's impersonality sees it as the "cultivation of a practice for its attainment" (Cameron 2003, 218) rather than as something desirable but impossible, or desirable and inevitable. Weil's process aims to lose all personal being to create a void that is receptive to supernatural grace and virtue, but despite its supernatural ends, "cultivation of attention is a *naturalistic* process" (Cameron, 218). Weil's practice of impersonality through attention is a "philosophy of Perception, of a practical and experimental nature" (Weil 1956, 1:313). This is Weil's response to the problem of situations and situational behavior.

Weil's understanding of human existence is such that it is impossible for us to know people as equals, for the nature of human life is that no one can be equal in the world, "men are unequal in all their relations with the things of this world, without exception" (Weil 2005, 223). We are, following her reflections on factory life through to her ethical program, only able to recognize humanity as equal through our own consent to and practice of anonymity and impersonality, despite this being in many ways incompatible with human existence.[12] It is only when, through attention, we cultivate this impersonality that we are able to adopt an ethical stance towards the neighbor and towards to those suffer. This attitude of love towards the neighbor, that way of looking at them occurs only where the soul has emptied "itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth" (Weil 1951, 65). This cultivation of attention combines body and mind, and Pirruccello writes that "stated in its most ideal form, her hope was that by training, cultivating, disciplining, and habituating the biological body" (2002, 485) one would know the world better, integrate the mind, body, and universe. From this, one would develop an ethical position towards the world of "non-selectivity or non-opposition" (*ibid*, 495).

Thus, the psychological stance that Weil sees we can habituate and cultivate is one where, for instance, the "respectful, unselfconscious attention that is

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[12] She writes we are to consent "to being anonymous, to being human material (Eucharist); to renounce prestige, public esteem—that is to bear witness to the truth, namely, that one is composed of human material, that one has no rights. It is to cast aside all ornament, to put up with one's nakedness. But how is this compatible with social life and its labels?" (Weil 1956, 1:217).

frequently displayed when encountering works of art... [can] bear upon how we relate to people" (Freeman 2015, 160). However, developing this ethics of attention is not straightforward. After all, the question arises whether my practicing of *Clair de Lune* or various translation exercises can really make me "a better person—more attentive, respectful, other-directed? The answer is clear: Yes, sometimes; but no, not always" (Freeman, 169). This resembles the conclusion of another engagement of Weil's account of attention with psychology, which argues for an active stance of attention in this respect, where the direction of attention to our limits is "not merely being solely passive, but abiding one's position persistently with a tenacious wish" (Ikeda 2009, 174). Yet this is not the intention of Weil: her intention is instead to navigate the relationship between our own efforts, moral or otherwise, and grace. It is in this sense that Weil's stance can point towards a different option in character studies. Her attention "prepares for but does not solicit grace" (Kotva 2020, 160), and perhaps virtuous character should be seen the same way: as something we can prepare for, but not something we can solicit or gain purely through human effort.

Weil's understanding of attention and its ends, as both ethical and fundamentally oriented towards God, can challenge aspects of character studies and provide new avenues of exploration. One approach that is perhaps worth exploring elsewhere in more depth is her account of habit formation. It is one directed at cultivating a loving and empathic character through everyday activities through attention. Another approach may be to take her as a moral exemplar, which I would be hesitant to, considering the extremes of her life and death. However, her impossible example and equally possible demands can provide a normative framework through which to explore human nature and existence, both theologically and psychologically. Her particular understanding of character development through its eradication is certainly a productive avenue to explore, as her thesis is that the eradication of character and personality enables the possibility of empathy, love, and equal action towards others. In keeping with her classification as a mystic, this process is also orientated to that which is outside of human action and experience: towards God. Shifting the conversation from effort to grace, from will-power to receptivity, can open up ways in which the diverse traditions within Christianity can be brought into conversation with psychological sciences.

Through her acceptance of the situatedness of human existence and her disavowal of positively changing and cultivating virtues, she is not vulnerable to the criticisms levelled by Harman and Doris. Yet she does not completely refuse character, instead she reconceives it. She reconceives it in relation to God, and thus her proposal for restoring human nature involves both human effort and human receptivity. In her account she seeks to control human nature in order to

open it up to a God's-eye-view, and to God. She is well aware of the stubbornness of the self and the assertion of the self, even if disguised as character, and hence she strives to cultivate impersonality and attention, especially in relation to God.

This self-controlled and regulated state of passive activity is the character that we are called to develop. From there we wait for grace. Weil's account of human nature is that it can and should be trained in order to best receive grace and from that be able to act ethically. Having explored Weil's relationship to character studies, and her challenge to it, I will now explore a way in which her account of human nature and character as trainable and malleable coheres with psychologically-informed theological work on human nature.

## 4. Attention as Restoration

Having explored the cultivation of attention and its relationship to moral psychology in the area of character studies, I turn now to the way in which this account of attention coheres with recent work that explores the relationship between psychological science and theology. The first of these concerns human nature as both extremely limited but also fundamentally changeable. Human nature is malleable and changeable from within and without, but not without limits. This approach reflects perspectives such as Kathryn Tanner's account of human plasticity, and Gerald McKenny's model of human nature. McKenny, in navigating the question of to what extent human nature should be seen as in need of technological and psychological adjustment and improvement, argues for an account of human nature as malleable, but also as suited or equipped "for a particular form of life with God" (McKenny 2018, 147). In Tanner's model, human nature images God in its plasticity, open-endedness and expandability, where "in contrast to other creatures, human beings are unusually flexible, capable of adapting, of altering their behaviors in order to adjust to changing social and natural environments" (Tanner, 41). Humanity, as made in the image of God, is thus imitative of "God's incomprehensibility by having a nature which is also in a sense unlimited, unbounded by clearly delimited nature" (Tanner, 53).

McKenny develops his own thesis about human nature in dialogue with Tanner and Barth. He draws more on Barth's thought as he sees it enables McKenny to avoids the pitfalls of accounts of human nature that either seek to "keep our nature off-limits (NS1) or to default to its susceptibility to intervention" (McKenny, 192). By neither seeing human nature as fixed and unchangeable, nor as to be tinkered with limitlessly, we can ask the correct questions about it. Human nature can be viewed as indeterminate, open-ended, and malleable but not so indeterminate, open-ended, and malleable that we seek to cheat death or seek enhancement for its own sake. Instead, we are able to accept that "our existing characteristics and capacities are adequate to their

meaning and purpose" (*ibid*, 189). Weil's account can challenge and complement McKenny's argument. In the face of biotechnological enhancements that promise a better kind of existence, McKenny argues that we should take a positive attitude towards our own limited but malleable nature. Instead of seeing it as fundamentally lacking, it "already has what is needed for humans to enjoy life with God" (McKenny, 177). Weil's vision of human nature argues that we have what is needed to begin to develop a chance to enjoy life with God, and it is that which must be trained and developed. The malleability of the human nature is the condition for the possibility of life with God, for we can change ourselves to an extent, and that extent is our receptivity to grace. Human nature can be restored and remade, but not for the aim of enhancing our experiences, but to receive the right perspective. Outside of this receptivity, human nature is distracted and *akratic*, hurling itself against its limitations and its situations. Her positive program of habit-formation seeks to bring out humanity's fundamental receptivity in contrast to our desire to constantly assert ourselves and our powers.

Weil's thought can complement McKenny's account of human nature, to query what we should change and whether we should desire to transcend our human boundaries. Her approach expands and tempers his. Moreover, her naturalistic account of attention and its formation allows human nature to be malleable and changeable without tying it to the image of God in humanity. Instead, our relationship to God is fundamentally passive, as otherwise it would involve building up the I at the expense of God and the other. With our receptivity, Weil is more pessimistic in her claims about human nature in itself, and while this is a point of concern, her approach is thus not as vulnerable to the failures of human nature as that is the point from which she starts. Human nature can and is to be restored, but through a rejection of the self and its claims to virtue rather than a cultivation of them. She can thus provide an account of restorative human nature that is cautious about human nature in itself.

This approach stands in contrast to that taken by the character skeptics, where psychological science is used to discount human moral effort. Weil's sustained practice of self-controlled active passivity shows that one can in fact work towards a state that brings about transformation without reaching for it. As Murdoch illustrates in her own reception of Weil's account of attention, it is a vision of human existence that is able to engage with our situatedness but not one that leaves it there. Ethical theories often forget that "we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by" (Murdoch 1970, 39). Murdoch uses the example of a woman who spends more time with her daughter-in-law and through that overcomes her initial dislike. Though attending properly to the person and situation she is confronted with, her views

are changed indirectly. In attention, we do not choose actively to act in one way or the other: it happens to us. The task of attention is one that "goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking', making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results" (*ibid*, 43). This she links to the practice of religion: it trains one in the contemplation that leads to the self-restraint and attitude that attention consists of, a detachment in which "selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen" (*ibid*, 64).

Weil's practice of attention is able, in its particular goal and how it is achieved, to avoid the questions over character and its use in ethical action. Weil does not require that we practice virtue nor that we form our character through habituated virtue, but that we cultivate and constantly practice a stance that is an openness. The problem is not seen as lack of development of character, instead personality itself is the problem. We thus develop this posture of openness and patience, of receptivity, and through this, rather than through focusing on particular actions or virtues, we can recast the relationship between moral psychology, virtue, and character. If what we are developing is not a virtue *per se* but a new understanding of attention as a sustained passive activity, as self-control and self-regulation for the sake of itself, then we can reframe the discussion on what it means to develop character. In emphasizing the passivity and receptiveness of human nature rather than its activity we are able to move beyond the dichotomy drawn up between situation and character. This trained, disciplined, and developed passivity rather than our situational and behavioral passivity enables us to approach the debate anew, starting from a position that does not pit character and situation against each other, but one that envelopes situation into the development of character through understanding the passivity of the human ethical subject. The situationist and character debate is unlikely to be settled soon, but this approach offers a new understanding of character to work with: a certain attentive, controlled character that can be the bulwark against situation, rather than the eudaimonic character.

Weil's concept and practice of attention has import and use for accounts that seek to explore the restoration of human nature, and brings forward new insights that can be worked with in dialogue with theology and psychological science. With the cultivation of attention as a naturalistic, psychological, and indeed embodied practice she can provide a roadmap for an increased receptivity not only for ethical action but for theological engagement. With the development and holding of attention, she can provide a nuanced account of human receptivity and malleability with regard to grace. This approach can bring a new perspective and analysis to conversations about virtue, character, and ethical action, through its challenge to accounts of human nature that view it perhaps too optimistically, and to accounts of human existence that see it perhaps too pessimistically.

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