Attention to Suffering in the Work of Simone Weil and Käthe Kollwitz

by

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Toril Moi

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the ethical and conceptual connections between Weil’s account of attention and Kollwitz’s artistic practice of attention, especially attention to suffering. Attention, in Weil’s view, is a strenuous surrender to things as they are, which involves the difficult work of letting those things be other than we desire (or even need) them to be. For both Weil and Kollwitz, attention is the only meaningful way of engaging human suffering, one’s own or that of others. My dissertation explores their ethically risky claim, and argues that attention is not only interesting or valuable but necessary when it comes to suffering: any genuine attempt to engage with suffering must begin with a discipline substantially similar to the one Weil writes about as attention and Kollwitz practices in her art. I show how Kollwitz visually extends Weil’s philosophy and theology of attention to suffering in two distinct ways: first, by attending in her art to her own suffering as well as the suffering of others; and second, by investing her art with a wholehearted and tactile focus on the human body.

For Weil, it is attention (as opposed to the will) that is at the heart of human agency. Meaningful action is, for her, impossible without attention. This means that actions intended to alleviate suffering cannot be effective unless they begin (and remain grounded) in attention. This is true especially because one of the effects of suffering (especially the extreme suffering Weil calls malheur, or affliction) is to disfigure the sufferer so much that she is no longer recognizable (even to herself) as a human being,
and becomes invisible. Weil writes that attention, which is a form of love, is able to see sufferers even when suffering has made them invisible. Because attention is an exercise of the image of God in human beings, and is a participation in God’s work in the world, it can restore to those whom suffering has reduced to the status of objects a sense of their own human value and dignity. When it comes to our own suffering, the discipline of attention involves accepting it rather than attempting to evade it by passing it on to others. Weil argues that because of the way God entered into suffering in Christ’s incarnation and passion, the nature of suffering has changed: suffering is no longer empty, but is instead a place where we can meet God.

Kollwitz’s two first series of prints (A Weavers’ Revolt and Peasants’ War) show her drawing on many of the strands of modern art that surround her in pursuit of one central goal: to attend to human beings, and to help her viewers learn such attention through her work. The many states of her prints show the rigor of her revisions and the resonance between her artistic process and Weil’s account of attention. Over the course of her career, her aim of seeing humans accurately becomes more and more an aim to see those who suffer. On the one hand, Kollwitz turns toward the industrial poor among whom she lived, whose sufferings tended to make them invisible to others. On the other hand, she turns toward her own suffering, particularly her grief over the death of her son in WWI. In a late series of woodcuts called War, and in her bronze sculpture Mother with Dead Son, she connects the two. Both the print series and the sculpture serve as an
invitation to hesitate in a way that lets us attend to the crushing and disorienting reality of suffering. I argue that the series *War* shows humans meeting their own exposure to the possibility of affliction, and that Kollwitz’s self-described calling “to voice the sufferings of people” fits into a theological account of lament, which presents human suffering in the context of God’s hearing and care.

My dissertation contributes to theological aesthetics by proposing attention as a generally commendable practice of perception, and by offering Weil and Kollwitz’s way of engaging with suffering as an alternative to theodicy.
Dedication

To Roger and Claudia Gehring, for your love, generosity, sense of adventure, and for helping me remember what really matters.

To Jim, for your patience, love, friendship, humor, logistical genius, and willingness to eat out.

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sounded like something they would want to read.
Introduction

This is a book about difficulty and about hope. The difficulty is human suffering: the fact of it, the overwhelming extent of it, and the way suffering can cut us off from one another, whether we are inside or outside it. The difficulty is in the ways in which suffering is outside our control, and the terror of this; the ways in which it is inside our control, and the mystery and horror of how little we make use of our control; and the horror of how often we make use of our control precisely in order to hurt. There is also the difficulty of describing suffering, our own or other people’s, to ourselves or to others. The difficulty of describing suffering to ourselves results in a sense of trackless lostness, of feeling that we know neither where we are in the world, nor who we are. The difficulty of describing our suffering to others results in disconnection and loneliness. Failed descriptions that leave out or misrepresent key aspects of what suffering feels like lead to the isolation of having our situations described back to us in a way that does not line up with our actual experience.

My use of the term “difficulty” draws on Cora Diamond’s use of that term in her essay “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” which in turn draws on Stanley Cavell’s thought, in particular on his use of the term “exposure” in The Claim of Reason and his term “deflection” in the account of the possibility of knowing the suffering of others from his essay “Knowing and Acknowledging.” All of these are discussed in greater detail in the third chapter, but for now, Diamond considers
difficulties in reality to be things that “shoulder us out” of our sense of reality, that we cannot make sense of even when we try. Difficulty is, importantly, perspectival—the same reality (suffering, beauty, an unexpected kindness, the presence in a photograph of men who have died in war, cruelty to animals) may seem explainable to one person and may “throw” another person. Diamond thinks it is the work of philosophy not to deflect from such problems by veering off into explanation or argument about closely related (but separate) issues, but rather to sit with the difficulty, or with the person experiencing the difficulty. Diamond uses Cavell’s term “deflection” to describe what we are doing when we do not stay with the difficulty but veer off.

I said that this book is about difficulty and about hope. The hope is not of eradicating suffering. It is, at first glance, a small hope: of recognizing suffering for what it is, and recognizing sufferers as human beings. The French philosopher Simone Weil called the discipline of doing just this attention, and the German artist Käthe Kollwitz practiced it in her life and work, and left behind images and sculptures that can help us learn it. I find Weil’s account of attention and Kollwitz’s work hopeful not because they make suffering go away, but because they accept it, and do not deflect from its reality with explanations that pretend to “solve” its difficulty. Attention is the only way I know of getting past deflection. Much of the difficulty of describing suffering, much of the

1 Diamond gets the phrase “shouldered out” of reality from Ted Hughes’ poem, “Six Young Men,” from The Hawk in the Rain, 54-55; cited by Diamond, 1.
isolation of suffering, and much of the increased suffering that follows failed
descriptions, result from our tendency to deflect. Deflection seems to come so naturally
to us that it can feel nearly impossible to respond to suffering (our own or that of other
people) in any other way. I find Weil’s account of attention hopeful because it describes
a discipline that can help us begin to learn how not to deflect. In helping us learn how to
respond to suffering without deflecting, Weil is doing more than helping us to arrive at
better descriptions of suffering. She is also helping us to meet suffering in a way that
helps suffering not to be greater than it has to be, and that helps us to suffer well when
we must suffer, which means in a way that lets the suffering end with us rather than
passing it on to others.

One of the worst strands in suffering is its power to destroy our sense of our own
humanity and to make us invisible as human beings, to ourselves and to others. Weil
calls suffering that accomplishes such destruction malheur, or “affliction.” Attention to
affliction is the most difficult kind of attention possible (Weil thinks it is impossible for
humans aside from the work of God), but one of the reasons Weil is so committed to
attention as a way of life is that attention in itself has the power to draw humans
partway out of affliction. This is true because one of the constitutive elements of
affliction is its ability to make people invisible as humans—and so seeing an afflicted
person begins to unravel one layer of her suffering.
Sitting with the difficulty of suffering is hard, whether the suffering is our own or someone else’s. Weil sees attention as a discipline and as learnable. Her notebooks contain repeated instances of her own instructions to herself on how to practice attention. Such practice requires a willingness to imagine and pursue goals other than our own comfort. It also requires a willingness to hesitate, to hold in our attention a reality to which no satisfying response occurs to us, and bear that tension without turning away. Hesitation, for Weil, is a prerequisite for attention. If we always leap directly into action without pausing, there is no room in our lives for the tension of staying with suffering. And while no other person (and certainly no inanimate object) can pay attention for us or force us to pay attention, I find Käthe Kollwitz’s artwork hopeful as a response to suffering because it is an invitation to hesitate, and even a companion in our hesitating. Because it is so easy to turn away, to avoid, to deflect, it is helpful to have guides and companions in the journey of learning attention: people or things that help point us to the place of sitting with difficulty by marking it, saying *This is the hard place. Stay here.* Kollwitz’s work does just that.

**Simone Weil and Käthe Kollwitz**

Weil and Kollwitz share a fragmented, uneven reception history. They are by turns revered to the point of hagiography, soberly and thoroughly studied, violently denounced, condescendingly dismissed, and completely ignored, so that bringing their
names up in a conversation is a little like drawing a card at random from a deck. What
will it be this time—the blank look? the sneer? the knowing smile?

Weil

Simone Weil was a French philosopher and activist. She was born in Paris in 1909
to a secular Jewish doctor and his wife, and died in 1943 at age 34 in a sanatorium in
Ashford, England, of tuberculosis and malnutrition. She had a highly intellectual
childhood, learning ancient Greek from her older brother André (who went on to
become a celebrated mathematician) by the time she was twelve.² She studied under
Alain (Emile Chartier), wrote a thesis on perception in Descartes, and was known at
school variously as “the red virgin” or “the categorical imperative in skirts” for her
uncompromising political ethics.³ After graduating from the Ecole Normale, she taught
intermittently, with breaks to recover her health (she suffered especially from
debilitating migraines) and for activist work. She volunteered with anarchists known as

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² Francine du Plessix-Grey, describing André and Simone’s interactions: “Who could have
guessed […] that Simone’s recitation of the lament for Hippolyte from Racine’s Phèdre was meant
to inform her brother that she had completed her Latin composition and was ready to study
Aeschylus with him as soon as he was finished with his differential calculus?” (Simone Weil, 3-4).
³ Simone de Beauvoir records one short meeting with Weil in which she (Beauvoir), fascinated by
hearing that Weil burst into tears upon reading of a famine in China, and envying her for “having
a heart that could beat right across the world,” approached Weil. Beauvoir writes that she does
not know how the conversation got started. But Weil made a pronouncement that “only one
thing mattered in the world today: the Revolution which would feed all the starving people of
the earth.” Beauvoir “retorted, no less peremptorily, that the problem was not to make men
happy, but to find the reason for their existence.” Weil looked Beauvoir up and down. “It’s easy
to see you’ve never gone hungry,’ she snapped.” “Our relationship,” Beauvoir concludes drily,
“did not go any further” (Simone de Beauvoir, Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, tr. James Kirkup,
239; originally Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée).
the Durruti Column in the Spanish Civil War, but burned her foot badly in a pot of cooking oil and had to return to France. Later she spent a little over a year working in various automotive factories, with the goal of understanding the nature of factory work in order to be able to pursue viable plans for reform. She wrote about her experience in a factory journal, as well as in a book-length sympathetic critique of Marx, *Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression* (*Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale*).\(^4\)

She left France for New York in 1942 because her parents refused to go without her, and then spent the last year of her life struggling unsuccessfully to return to France, getting as far as London. Interpretations of her death range from martyrdom to anorexia.\(^5\) The best description I have heard is that she died of a complicated broken heart over not being able to share or alleviate the wartime sufferings of France.\(^6\)

Beginning in 1935, Weil had a series of mystical experiences that were totally unexpected to her (she had concluded as a teenager that the question of God was unanswerable for lack of evidence and therefore unprofitable to consider). These experiences launched her into a passionate relationship with Catholicism. One of her key conversation partners was the Dominican priest Joseph-Marie Perrin, to whom she

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\(^4\) The book was published posthumously in 1955 as *Oppression et Liberté*, and translated into English in 1958 as *Oppression and Liberty*.

\(^5\) The coroner’s report on her death makes it sound like a possible suicide from self-starvation, and at one point Weil refused to eat more than she believed were wartime rations in France.

\(^6\) Springsted, “Beyond the Personal,” 209.
wrote the letter now known as her “Spiritual Autobiography,” which describes her progression of experiences of God (one in Portugal listening to fisherwomen sing; one while watching Eucharist over Easter in Solesmes; one while reciting George Herbert’s “Love (III);” and one in a church in Assisi, in which “something stronger than I was compelled me to go down on my knees.”) Very little of what she wrote was published before her death, and when, after her death, Perrin and Weil’s friend and patron Gustave Thibon collaborated on a selection from her notebooks published in 1947 as *Gravity and Grace (La pesanteur et la grâce)* and focusing particularly on spiritual themes, this launched an interpretation of her life and work on spiritual terms (including heated battles over whether she should be considered a Jew or a Christian). Albert Camus, who considered her “the only great spirit of our times” and went to her apartment in Paris in order to prepare himself for his 1957 Nobel Prize speech, collected and published another selection from her writings under the title *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes.* After the initial wave of interest in her from a spiritual perspective, her historical-materialist writings and political thought became better known, and one of the lasting tensions among her interpreters is over which of these ought to take priority in understanding her thought.

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8 In *L’Express,* February 11, 1961, cited by Hellmann, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to her Thought,* 1; Hellmann also cites it from Pierce, *Political Thought,* 121.
9 Bok, “‘No One to Receive It?’” 257.
**Kollwitz**

Käthe Kollwitz was born in 1867 in what was then Königsberg, Germany (and is now Kaliningrad, Russia). Her grandfather founded the first free protestant church in Germany, and her family history of religious dissent, social activism, and intellectual independence informed her lifelong perspective. Her father noticed and supported the development of her gifts as an artist, paying for her training with private teachers and at women’s art schools in Berlin and Munich at a time when only limited artistic training was available to women. She married a doctor, Karl Kollwitz, who took a job as a union doctor in Berlin, where they lived for the rest of their lives in the working-class quarter where Karl had his practice. Their two sons Hans and Peter were born in 1892 and 1896. She focused on drawing and printmaking, mostly in black and white, for a number of reasons. She felt she had more of a gift for it than for painting, and it suited her space and financial constraints especially at the beginning of her career better than large canvases would have. She felt drawing and printmaking was better suited to art that grappled with human difficulties (here she drew on Max Klinger’s writing about the difference between painting and the graphic arts in *Painting and Drawing (Malerei und Zeichnung)*). Printmaking was easier and more affordable to produce in quantity, which became a greater concern as her audience came to include more working-class people.

Her breakthrough success as an artist was the print series *A Weavers’ Revolt (Ein Weberaufstand)*, completed in 1898 and displayed for the first time at the Greater Berlin
Art Show (Große Berliner Kunstausstellung). This narrative series, based on the Silesian Weavers’ Revolt in 1844 and inspired by Gerhart Hauptmann’s play The Weavers (Die Weber), was followed by a second series, Peasants’ War (Bauernkrieg), completed in 1908, which had a similar narrative revolutionary arc, although the individual prints were much more like standalone monuments, even tending toward the sculptural. Kollwitz began exploring sculpture in 1904, and completed several figural groups by the end of her career, including Mother with Dead Son (fig. 5), a bronze version of the print The Mothers (Die Mütter, fig. 12) called Tower of Mothers, and a pair of grieving parents, similar to The Parents from her print series War (Die Eltern, fig. 11), except that the two are not leaning against one another, but are separate. The grieving parents were a long and difficult project for her, deeply rooted in her own experience of grief: they were made for the cemetery where her son Peter, who died in the first weeks of World War I, was buried. Near the end of her career, Kollwitz began making woodcut prints, starting with a series in response to the first world war, called simply War (Krieg), which shows clearly how much she had moved toward sculpture in her thinking: two of the images that she eventually turned into sculptures are part of this series, and one of the prints derives explicitly from a sketch for a sculpture.
A writeup by Kito Nedo in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* explores the history of Käthe Kollwitz’s reception in Germany, noting its strange mixture of fame and forgottenness. Famous in her lifetime (as a person and as an artist), the first woman to be elected to the Prussian Academy of the Arts, she was predictably expelled from the Academy and effectively banned from exhibiting her work by National Socialists. After her death, she was (also fairly predictably) taken up into public life both by the eastern and western halves of the country. In East Germany, she became a national proletarian saint, her images of factory workers splashed everywhere, and what feels like every other school named after her. In the West, her poster *Never Again War* was an iconic symbol for the peace movement, a piece of “demonstration folklore.” More surprising was that in 1993, after reunification, Helmut Kohl (then Chancellor of the CDU or Christian Democratic Union, Germany’s more conservative party), had Kollwitz’s sculpture *Mother with Dead Son*, also known as *Pietà*, enlarged to four times its size and cast in bronze to serve as the memorial art in the Neue Wache in Berlin, dedicated to victims of war and tyranny. That the Soviets claimed Kollwitz made sense because of her extensive

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11 *Never Again War (Nie Wieder Krieg)* shows a young man or woman urgently holding up one arm with two fingers extended (although not in the spread “peace sign” way; the fingers are held close together), with the other hand on his or her heart. Scrawled in the blank background behind this figure, and underlined dramatically (the last word twice), are the words, “Nie wieder Krieg.” In the lower left corner in small print are the details of the poster’s original occasion: the Middle-German Youth Day, Leipzig, 2-4 August 1929.
body of work depicting the working class. That the peace movement claimed her also made sense, because in the second half of her life, after World War I and Peter’s death, Kollwitz began actively working to stop war efforts in Germany, calling for peace and writing that losing territory would be less destructive to Germany than losing its youth. Nedo notes how striking it is that an artist who had been claimed both as the champion of the proletariat in a communist sense, and as the poster child for the peace movement, should also have made a sculpture capable of serving as the national monument chosen by Chancellor Kohl for the Neue Wache. This appropriation of her work for multiple official state purposes may partly explain why, as the recent Winterberg biography reports, the chant “Never again war, never again Kollwitz!” has for years been circling around German art schools.12

Kollwitz died in 1945, days before WWII’s final cease-fire, and only about a decade later, long before Kohl and the Neue Wache, a postwar art establishment fascinated with protest art already tacitly refused to claim her. Nedo reports that the art critic Lucy Lippard explains Kollwitz’s unpopularity in the art world by her “closeness to life, which did not fit into the clichés of postwar art.” The Berlin curator Hans-Jürgen Hafner says she “cannot productively be demarginalized,” and the artist Katharina Sieverding suspects that her legacy as an artist was overshadowed by her personal

fame. Nedo supports Sieverding’s assessment when he notes that Kollwitz’s posthumous popularity did not follow the “routine dynamic of forgetting, remembering, and reappraisal” (at least not in Germany) because you cannot claim as forgotten an artist whose face is printed on postage stamps.

In Germany, Kollwitz is famous for having said “I want to make a difference in this time, in which people are so lost and in need of help.” The German word I have translated as “make a difference” is “wirken,” which is related to the English “work,” and implies the idea of having an effect, of accomplishing something. But while Kollwitz hopes to have an effect, and is willing to make art that has a specific purpose (as in the case of poster art), her art does not propose political programs. She often made posters to promote efforts to help the working poor, or to alleviate hunger in besieged places (once Vienna, once Russia), but she was too aware of the effects of violent revolution to feel comfortable joining the communist party, and writes in her diaries of inner conflicts over her political allegiances. Her images are aimed at affecting viewers, and producing an effect in them that leads to action—but especially outside the posters, they often do not specify what that action should be. This is one reason why I see her work as resonating so deeply with Weil’s account of attention, especially attention to suffering:

13 Nedo, ibid.
14 “Ich bin einverstanden damit, daß meine Kunst Zwecke hat. Ich will wirken in dieser Zeit, in der die Menschen so ratlos und hilfsbedürftig sind” (Die Tagebücher, 4. Dezember 1922, p. 542), emphasis Kollwitz’s).
both women saw attention and action as inseparable from one another. For both of them, attending to suffering, in ourselves or in others, is valuable in its own right as a way of reminding ourselves of our common humanity. It is also the only way into right action, action that is a genuine response to suffering and not one more form of deflection.

**Chapter Overview**

In the first chapter, I place Kollwitz as an artist in the art historical currents that flow around and through her work, and begin to show the ways in which Weilian attention illuminates Kollwitz’s work by giving us better access to Kollwitz’s central artistic and ethical concerns. The chapter focuses on Kollwitz’s second print series, *Peasants’ War*. It ends with an extended study of an image from that series called *Sharpening the Scythe (Beim Dengeln)*, which I take as a case study to show Kollwitz’s practice of attention through her work.

The second chapter lays out Weil’s thought on attention concisely. What she means by attention is a posture of openness toward a person, an object, or any reality in the world around us, a posture of focused receptiveness that lets us see things as they are and as they exist for their own sakes, rather than as they appear to us through the screen of our own self-interest. She thinks that attention is difficult but learnable, and that every human being is capable of learning it. Attention involves a kind of deliberate surrendering of our sense of centrality in the world, a willingness to come into contact
with reality and to let it destroy our self-serving and self-comforting illusions. Attention always ultimately moves us into greater openness toward God (Weil writes repeatedly that true attention is prayer). At the end of the chapter, I take Kollwitz’s sculpture _Mother with Dead Son_ (fig. 5) as an example of what I mean when I say that Kollwitz’s work helps us learn and practice Weilian attention, and that Kollwitz’s work contributes to our understanding of what it means to pay attention to suffering, and can help us learn such attention.

The third chapter considers Weil and Kollwitz’s work together in order to understand more deeply what it means to both of them to pay attention to suffering. Why does it matter? Why is it so hard? I examine Weil’s idea of the overwhelming suffering of affliction and her idea of the necessity of hesitation as a condition for attention. The chapter draws on Cora Diamond’s discussion of the difficulty of reality, on Diamond and Cavell’s discussions of deflection, and on Cavell’s account of exposure as the thing we are avoiding when we deflect. Because literary tragedy is centrally about attending to suffering, I make a closer study of avoidance, exposure, tragedy and attention in Weil’s thought, and return again to Kollwitz’s _Mother with Dead Son_ (fig. 5).

The fourth chapter ends with a study of Kollwitz’s three major print series in comparison, focusing especially on the final series of woodcuts, _War (Krieg)_ and then on a woodcut self-portrait Kollwitz made in the same period. I see both _War_ and the self-portrait as instances of visual lament implying a theological understanding of suffering,
and I also see them as visual examples of what it means to accept our own exposure to the possibility of affliction, which is a prerequisite for being able to attend to affliction.

**Contribution to Scholarship**

This dissertation contributes to the field of theological aesthetics. Classical theological aesthetics concerned itself with the great transcendental attributes of God (such as unity, oneness, simplicity, and beauty) and with the ways in which these attributes are communicated to human beings through material sense perception. Today, the field has expanded, following philosophical aesthetics, and has become a rambling subject that draws on phenomenology from van der Leeuw to Merleau-Ponty to Marion and Henri, and takes up questions about the relationship not only between sense perception and theology but also between theology and the arts (which in turn includes the two quite different questions of what the arts have to offer theology, and what theology has to offer to the arts). There are well-developed strains of theological aesthetics in the Eastern Orthodox (John of Damascus, Theodore the Studite, Florensky, Lossky, Evdokimov, Hart), Catholic (from Augustine to Balthasar to Maritain to Viladesau to Gregory Wolfe), Reformed (from Kuyper to Rookmaker and Barth to Seerveld, Begbie, Wolterstorff, and Gorringe), and Lutheran (Hegel, Kierkegaard, Vrudny, Robert Jensen) traditions. There are histories of early Christian art, such as Robin Jensen’s. There is a strand of theological aesthetics in liberation theology, such as

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15 Thanks to Tanner Capps for help with this formulation.
Goizueta’s. There are secular studies of evangelical protestant visual practices, such as David Morgan’s, and Christian studies of secular art, such as Dan Siedell’s. And there is much more.

My project contributes to this unwieldy field in two primary ways. First is that it proposes Weilian attention as a generally commendable practice of perception (for artists as well as non-artists), and proposes Kollwitz’s work as an aid to understanding what Weilian attention is and how it relates to suffering, as well as an aid in actually learning to practice such attention. Though I am concerned with perception, I am not examining the inner workings or the philosophical implications of perception at the level of detail practiced by phenomenologists. Instead, I am working in a mode of popular instruction to both artists and laypeople that was practiced in the 18th century, when modern aesthetics began to develop as an independent branch of philosophy (examples of such writing include Shaftesbury’s, Addison’s, or Baumgarten’s).¹⁶

It is worth noting, however, that many of these instructions aimed to develop theories or criteria for what counted as good art, either in order to help artists make better art, or in order to help viewers of art develop better taste. My project does not focus on providing criteria for how to produce or recognize good art. While I hope that what I write will be useful both to artists and to viewers of art, I am neither writing instructions to artists on how to make good art, nor am I writing instructions to viewers

¹⁶ Thanks to Brian Curry for the suggestion to think of my project from this angle.
on how to recognize good art. Instead, my goal is to discuss and commend a Weilian discipline of attention, exemplified in Kollwitz’s art, because I believe it is the only way of engaging meaningfully with suffering. This is true both for artists who are making art in response to suffering, and for human beings in general, who are constantly confronted with suffering in their own lives and the lives of those around them. I hope that both artists and non-artists will find my study of Weil and Kollwitz helpful as a description of what it means, and what it requires of us, to engage with suffering. What I attempt to describe in the following pages is what it means to pay attention, why attention matters so much for suffering, and how we can learn such attention. Behind this description is the firm belief that learning attention makes all the difference in the world both for artists and for humans in general, and for the same reason: because attention is our only way of making contact with what is, and whenever we do not practice it, we are, as Weil puts it, like sleepwalkers moving through a dream, in contact only with our own illusions, and out of contact with what is.17

The second contribution my project makes to theological aesthetics is that it offers an alternative to theodicy. My topics (suffering, hope, the presence of God) are some of the building blocks for traditional theodicy, which seeks to justify the goodness of God in the face of evil and of horrific human suffering. Philip Tallon named his survey of aesthetic theodicies The Poetics of Evil, and the title alone goes a long way

17 Œuvres Complètes, 1, 316.
toward conveying the uneasy relationship between aesthetic theology and theodicy. The book itself supports the title’s unease: whether one frames one’s theodicy in terms of the aesthetic value of beauty or of horror, justifications of evil on aesthetic grounds are at best interestingly flawed, and at worst themselves sources of horror.

My dissertation does not present an aesthetic theodicy. Instead, it attempts to present an alternative to the whole project of theodicy, which I see as important but inherently bankrupt. It is important because it grapples with central human questions. It is bankrupt because it poses the question about evil and God’s goodness in a way that admits only of unacceptable responses: if we can justify evil in terms of God’s goodness, that is as much of a problem in its own way as if we cannot justify it. I submit that Weil and Kollwitz’s response to suffering, which is to accept its existence and to meet it with attention, is a hopeful alternative to theodicy. It is the best available way of moving toward minimizing and alleviating human suffering in the world, and of opening ourselves to God’s presence and work.18

18 Some technical notes: Throughout the dissertation, unattributed translations from the German and French are mine. Citations for Weil’s texts are where possible from Weil et al., Œuvres Complètes (OC). If a text has not yet appeared in the OC, my next choice will be Weil and Lussy, Oeuvres.
1. Kollwitz and Weilian Attention

Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.

Iris Murdoch, drawing on Simone Weil

Adolf Heilborn reports a conversation with Kollwitz in which she said, “It really wasn’t, or at least not consciously, social concern that drove me even back then [1890] to draw just these people over and over. It was more that they gave me purely aesthetic pleasure. A dock worker is beautiful in the development of his body. A working-class woman shows me, in her body and bearing, much more than the lady who, in all she does and refrains from doing, is constricted by conventions. She shows me her hands, feet, and hair; she lets me see her body through her dress; and she is much more open [lit. “much less wrapped up and hidden”] in expressing her feelings.” Martin Fritsch notes that Kollwitz’ statement puts her in line with the values of naturalism, a nineteenth-century movement to which she is connected through her teachers (who

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2 “Es war eigentlich, oder wenigstens nicht bewußt, durchaus nicht das Soziale, das mich schon damals dazu trieb, gerade diese Menschen immer wieder zu zeichnen. Ich hatte vielmehr an ihnen eine rein ästhetische Freude. Solch ein Hafenarbeiter ist in der Durchbildung seines Körpers schön. Solch eine Arbeitnehmerin zeigt mir von ihrer Gestalt und ihrem Wesen viel mehr als die durch Konvention überall in ihrem Tun und Lassen eingeengte Dame. Sie zeigt mir ihre Hände, ihre Füße, ihre Haare, sie läßt mich durch das Kleid hindurch den Körper sehen; sie gibt sich auch in ihren Gefühlsäußerungen viel unverhüllter” (Heilborn, Die Zeichner des Volks, 32 and 36).
3 Fritsch in Kollwitz et al., Selbstbildisse/Self-Portraits, 48.
were uniformly naturalistic in their work). The 1890s, when Kollwitz came of age as an artist, were a hotbed of “isms.” Some of the key movements in art and literature that surround Kollwitz are naturalism, realism, symbolism, and expressionism, and each of them informs her work and concerns, but fails to describe them holistically. This is because Kollwitz’s goal is to see people, as she puts it, as “unhiddenly” as possible, and to lead her viewers into the same kind of seeing. In pursuit of that goal, she becomes a master borrower, taking from the art movements around her what she can use to deepen her seeing or to communicate it more effectively to her viewers, and leaving the rest.

As T. J. Clark points out in his landmark *Image of the People*, art does not simply arise passively out of the dominant ideologies of an age. But of course, neither does it single-handedly create and shape culture. Instead, in a complex interplay that must be traced out one artist and one painting and one art show at a time, it arises out of an artist’s practice (which is itself shaped by the artist’s cultural formation) and interacts with the ideologies, assumptions, and values of the public and the critics who engage with it, possibly challenging or shifting or deepening them.4

1.1 Käthe Kollwitz5

“Now it had been clear to my father for a long time,” Käthe Kollwitz wrote of the beginning of her career as an artist, “that I was gifted at drawing; this gave him great joy

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4 Clark, *Image of the People; Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851.*
5 Biographical facts not otherwise cited are taken from the Cologne Kollwitz Museum’s online biographical timelines (“Käthe Kollwitz Museum”).
and he wanted to have me trained fully as an artist. It was too bad that I was a girl, but even so he wanted to go full steam ahead. He expected that since I was not a pretty girl, matters of love would not get in my way too much; and that is probably why he was so disappointed and upset when I bound myself to Kollwitz at only seventeen."⁶ She wrote this in 1923 when she was 56, living in Berlin with her husband, who had for several decades been working as the doctor for the industrial tailors’ union. They had two sons, the older Hans still alive, and the younger Peter killed in Flanders in the early days of World War I. And as of 1898, when her print series A Weavers’ Revolt won national acclaim, Kollwitz was the first German woman to receive serious recognition as an artist.

She was born in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) in 1867. Her mother’s father, Julius Rupp, founded the first free protestant church in Germany (that is, the first protestant church that was not part of the state Lutheran church). Rupp had broken with the Lutheran church over questions about freedom of conscience, in a protracted battle that cost him his livelihood twice over (first he was fired as a Lutheran pastor, then as the teacher at a church school). Kollwitz’s father studied law, but was barred from practicing for his membership in Rupp’s church. He retrained as a mason and became a successful and wealthy contractor before taking over the pastorate of the Free Church.

⁶ "Jetzt war es dem Vater lange klar, daß ich zeichnerisch beanlagt war, er hatte große Freude darüber und wollte mich ganz zur Künstlerin ausbilden. Leider war ich ein Mädchen, aber auch so wollte er alles dransetzen. Er rechnete damit, daß, da ich kein hübsches Mädchen war, mir Liebessachen nicht sehr hinderlich in den Weg kommen würden; und darum war er wohl auch so enttäuscht und aufgebracht, als ich mich bereits mit siebzehn Jahren an Kollwitz band" (Kollwitz, 1923, "Erinnerungen," Die Tagebücher, 725-26).
upon Rupp’s death. Kollwitz grew up in a dissenting, socially progressive, bourgeois family, steeped in German art and literature from Goethe to the local art museum, and fiercely committed both to duty and to individual freedom. She also grew up around manual labor, and reported being fascinated as a child by the beauty and strength of dock-workers’ movements (as opposed to the straitlaced movements of the bourgeois people who surrounded her).

Her training as an artist began in her teens, when her father sent her to the local painter Gustav Naujok and the engraver Rudolf Maurer for private lessons. When she was nineteen, she spent a year in Berlin studying in a women’s portraiture class with the Swiss artist Karl Stauffer-Bern who, though she wanted to paint, “kept point me back to drawing,”7 and introduced her to the etchings of Max Klinger, widely credited as the artist who stands at the beginning of modern printmaking in Germany.8 She returned to Königsberg for lessons with the painter Emil Neide, then accepted Karl Kollwitz’s proposal in 1887. Before marrying him, she spent two years in Munich at Ludwig Herterich’s School for Female Artists (Künstlerinnenschule), where she explored painting more fully, but wrote ruefully to her school friend Paul Hey that she painted

7 Kollwitz, “Rückblick auf frühere Zeit,” Tagebücher, 737, quoted in Prelinger et al., Käthe Kollwitz, 14.
8 Ibid., 15.
well with her eyes (in imagination), but that the paintings she actually produced with her hands (in practice) seemed deficient to her.9

Once she married Karl Kollwitz and moved to Berlin with him, she began focusing on graphic work partly out of financial and space constraints (drawing and printmaking both took up less space than large oils, since the actual printing was largely hired out). Knesebeck writes in the introduction to the most recent comprehensive catalogue of Kollwitz’s prints:

A letter by the artist on February 26th of 1891 to Paul Hey, a fellow student from her Munich years, conclusively indicates that Käthe Kollwitz turned to intaglio for the first time in the winter of 1890/91 during her brief stay in Königsberg: “I have started to etch and toward that end have done a mass of preparatory exercises in pen. In general I am now drawing much more than painting, out of the practical consideration that I will hardly have enough money in Berlin during the first years of my marriage to rent a studio. And the idea of painting oils in close quarters in which one is living is a sad one. Etching is so much less cumbersome.”10

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9 Ibid., 14, quoting Kollwitz, Briefe der Freundschaft und Begegnung, Munich, 1966, 145.
10 “Aus einem Brief der Künstlerin vom 26. Februar 1891 an Paul Hey, einen Studienkollegen aus der Münchner Studienzeit geht zweifelsfrei hervor, daß sich Käthe Kollwitz erstmals im Winter 1890/91 während des kurzen Aufenthalts in Königsberg der Radierung zuwandte: ‘Ich habe angefangen zu radieren und zu dem Zweck eine Masse Vorübungen mit der Feder gemacht. Überhaupt zeichne ich jetzt ungleich mehr als daß ich male, aus der praktischen Überlegung, daß ich in Berlin für die ersten Jahre meiner Verheiratung kaum Geld genug haben werde, um mir ein Atelier zu mieten. Und in engen Stuben, die man bewohnt, Ölbilder zu malen, das ist ein trauriger Gedanke. Das Radieren ist doch lange nicht so umständlich’” (Knesebeck, Kollwitz, and Klipstein, Käthe Kollwitz: Werkverzeichnis der Graphik, 17, quoting Käthe Kollwitz, Briefe der Freundschaft und Begegnungen, ed. Hans Kollwitz, 20). Knesebeck notes that Kollwitz was wrong about the difficulty of intaglio, and quotes a retrospective account in which Kollwitz describes how very cumbersome it was to have to teach herself most of the mechanics of etching, with only a brief introduction from her Königsberg teacher Rudolf Maurer under her belt (she did not have time for more before her wedding and the move to Berlin with Karl). The difficulty of printmaking will come up again in the final chapter.
Also influential in her choice, or at any rate in her later understanding of that choice, was Max Klinger’s 1891 *Painting and Drawing (Malerei und Zeichnung)*, which argued for the power and value of drawing and graphic arts in their own right, not just as sketches for paintings or as ways of reproducing paintings cheaply.\(^\text{11}\) In particular, Klinger argued that the graphic arts were unified (as painting was) and deserved to be thought of as a whole (he attempted to coin the term “stylus arts” (“Griffelkunst”) as a way of including both drawing and printmaking techniques under one name).\(^\text{12}\) Furthermore, he claimed the graphic arts were uniquely suited to portraying the difficult aspects of human experience.

Kollwitz developed a life-long commitment both to working almost exclusively in drawings and prints (and in black and white) and to spending the lion’s share of her time and energy as an artist on grappling with human suffering. She and her husband eventually rented three apartments directly on top of one another in the Weissenburgstrasse in Berlin. Karl had his practice in one, they lived in the second one, and Kollwitz had her studio in the third. Industrial workers and their wives and children became a daily part of Kollwitz’s experience. She hired them as models, tried to help meet their ongoing needs, and the childhood fascination with workers’ movements

\(^{11}\) Klinger, *Malerei und Zeichnung*.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 3-4.
and their “unhiddenness” grew into a deep concern for the suffering and oppression of the industrial urban poor, which figured extensively in her art.

Annette Seeler points out that the idea of *history painting* is key to understanding the shape of Kollwitz’s early artistic career. Seeler begins her monograph on Kollwitz’s *Peasants’ War* series (her second major series of prints) with an overview of the renaissance hierarchy of subjects worthy of artistic representation. At the top was history painting, which included important historical events as well as biblical, mythological, literary, and allegorical scenes. Next came portrait painting, then scenes of everyday life (genre painting), then landscapes and cityscapes, then animals and still lives. The higher levels were valued because they were seen as attempts to depict the Platonic essence of the world, rather than merely copying material realities, and the hierarchy was maintained and reinforced by art academies throughout Europe. Seeler points out that Kollwitz’s father intended that she be trained as a history painter, and that Kollwitz herself was committed to this goal (as a child already she had produced her own version of Karl Friedrich Lessing’s painting *Luther Burns the Papal Bull in front of the Elstertor in Wittenberg in the Year 1520*, to the family’s acclaim). The academic hierarchy had been losing influence since the beginning of the nineteenth century, as academic art and its standards and values were increasingly challenged. But in the late

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1800s in Germany, it still held enough sway that women were disbarred from studying at art schools that taught history painting. Kollwitz responded to this state of tension by learning what she could in her classes, and then organizing a women’s evening study group of her own, which pursued the skills specific to history painting: perspective and composition.

Kollwitz’s first two print series struck an ingenious balance between pursuing the aims of the history painting tradition, and flying in the face of the values of academic art. Kollwitz’s first major public success as an artist was _A Weaver’s Revolt_, a mixed series of three etchings and three lithographs inspired by Gerhart Hauptmann’s play _The Weavers (Die Weber)_). The play was based on the 1844 Silesian Weavers’ Revolt, of which Kollwitz saw the 1893 premiere. Her series fit into the tradition of history painting in that it showed historic events, in a narrative arc, with themes drawn from literature. But it challenged the tradition because it claimed as historically valuable not the kings, generals, or biblical patriarchs the academy valued, but precisely the subjects renaissance art had relegated to “genre” painting. Its historical arc was not the arc of treaties, coronations, or grand battles, but of one scrappy and brutally unsuccessful pre-industrial revolt. Furthermore, it was not history _painting_ at all but a graphic series of black and white prints; and to top it all off, it was done by a woman.

Kollwitz earned the respect of the art world on the one hand by establishing her skill in the males-only artform of epic histories, mastering precisely the territory women
were forbidden to enter; and on the other hand by criticizing that tradition, subverting its norms in medium and subject matter, and participating in the revolution art was undergoing around the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{14} It is not surprising, then, that when the series was first displayed at the Greater Berlin Art Exhibit (Große Berliner Kunstausstellung), the important German realist painter Adolph Menzel proposed a gold medal for it, which was vetoed by Kaiser Wilhelm II.\textsuperscript{15}

Following the success of the \textit{Weavers} series, Kollwitz was appointed to a teaching post at the Berlin Etching and Drawing School for Women (Künstlerinnenschule für Radieren und Zeichnen) and invited to participate in the Berlin Secession, a grouping of artists seeking alternatives to academic art. The art historian Max Lehrs began collecting her work for the Dresden Kupferstichkabinett (Collection of Prints and Drawings), and the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett followed suit. In 1901, Kollwitz read Wilhelm Zimmermann's \textit{General History of the Great Peasant War} (Allgemeine Geschichte des großen Bauernkrieges), and began work on her second series of prints, \textit{Peasants' War}. Like the \textit{Weavers}, this series has a revolutionary narrative structure, but is even more like a series of history paintings: each plate stands alone much more than the plates in the \textit{Weavers} series do, so that its effect is more of a progression of connected moments in a revolt than of one seamless story. Seeler reports that Kollwitz wrote in a letter that she would

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{15} The Kollwitz Museum’s website includes all this information, except for the detail that the nomination was made by Menzel, which is from Wikipedia’s entry “Käthe Kollwitz.”
have preferred to call the series *From the Time of the Peasants' Wars*, a title implying that each of the scenes represents a situation that characterized an epoch, rather than that the scenes represent separate moments in a narrative about one particular peasants’ war.\(^{16}\)

The 1500s, in which the peasants’ wars took place, were Luther’s time, a time of upheaval and reformation, the beginning of what is, in German, called “die Neuzeit,” “the new time,” the fourth historical period, which continues through today.\(^{17}\) Seeler argues that Kollwitz draws on the Reformation period’s energy to stage a revolt and reformation in her own art, matching the art “reformation” going on around her.\(^{18}\)

### 1.2 The Plowers and Raped

Kollwitz’s plates in *Peasants’ War* are unusually sized.\(^{19}\) Several of them are stretched out, either horizontally or vertically. The first plate in the series, *The Plowers* (*Die Pfälzer*, fig. 1), falls between the two aspect ratios common at the time of its creation: it is narrower (or longer) than the quarto format, but wider (or shorter) than the octavo

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\(^{16}\) Seeler, *Aufstand! -- Renaissance, Reformation Und Revolte Im Werk von Käthe Kollwitz. Katalog Zur Ausstellung Im Käthe-Kollwitz-Museum Köln*, 2017, 17. Near the beginning of its inception, partly through the support of Kollwitz’s Dresden museum collector and patron Max Lehrs, the series was put under commission by the Coalition for Historical Art (Verbindung für historische Kunst), with the plates to serve as yearly gifts to their members. This is why Kollwitz did not have full control of the title.

\(^{17}\) The four classic Western/European historical stages in German are prehistory (Vorgeschichte), the ancient period (Altertum), middle ages (Mittelalter), and new time (Neuzeit).


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 65.
format.\textsuperscript{20} It is, in other words, a deviation, but a fairly tame deviation. \textit{Raped}

(\textit{Vergewaltigt}, fig. 2, on which more below) is a stronger, more stretched-out deviation in format.

Kollwitz’s plate sizes, in addition to having unusual aspect ratios, were unusually large for their time. By making her plates large, Kollwitz moves toward the dimensions of history paintings, which were often life-sized.\textsuperscript{21} This enlargement is part of a bid first made by Max Klinger to claim serious art status for prints which had, as mentioned above, been used mainly for reproducing paintings cheaply.\textsuperscript{22} Kollwitz’s plate size also underlines her visual claim that the history she is representing in her series deserves to be taken seriously every bit as much as do coronations, treaties, and national wars. In the first plate she made for the series, \textit{Outbreak} (\textit{Losbruch}, fig. 9), Kollwitz even used a soft-ground etching technique to give the print background the texture of canvas, further confirming that she had history painting in mind as she worked. “In this way,” Seeler writes, “Kollwitz obviously disputes painting’s status as

\textsuperscript{20} Wikipedia reports that the current German standard paper sizes (all based on an aspect ratio of one to the square root of two, or approximately 1:1.4142 (which ingeniously maintain their aspect ratio exactly when folded in half or doubled width-wise) was set in August of 1922 (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papierformat#Geschichte). Before this, there was no standard, but a common aspect ratio was the quarto (a quarter of the papermaker’s sheet), which usually had an aspect ratio of 3:4, and the octavo (an eighth of a full sheet), which was a quarto folded in half, and therefore had an aspect ratio of 2:3. The \textit{Plowers} is 31.5 x 45.4 cm, which is a ratio of roughly 7 to 10, and therefore falls between the informal standard ratios extant before 1922, though it is very close to the ratio imposed as standard in 1922.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 47; Seeler notes that Elizabeth Prelinger has made the same observation about the series’ plate size.

\textsuperscript{22} Prelinger et al., \textit{Käthe Kollwitz}, 15.
the highest-ranked medium, which it had in the old academic hierarchy of genres, and asserts the equal value of her graphic creation.”

Figure 1: Kollwitz, *The Plowers (Die Pflüger)*, 1906, etching and aquatint, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Seeler notes that the dimensions of Kollwitz’s prints are important for another reason: horizontality and verticality have deep significance for the Peasants’ War series. The series takes the word “uprising” literally, and shows the peasants struggling to stand upright. They ultimately both succeed and fail: in the series’ final image, *The

\[\text{\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.}\]
Prisoners (Die Gefangenen), a group of peasants is herded together in a rope pen after their defeat in battle; they are upright but waiting for execution.

Kollwitz’s first plate in the series is called The Plowers (Die Pflüger, fig. 1). It shows two men pulling a plow, straining so hard that their bodies form a thirty-degree angle with the ground. In previous versions, Kollwitz included a figure clad in knight’s clothing, pressing his hand down on the shoulder of one of the plowers and literally holding him down, preventing him from standing up. Seeler claims that in some sketches the figure even appears to be leading the plowers by their harness as though they were draft animals, and although I see the figure mainly pressing down rather than leading, the implication is clear either way: the plowers, though human, are doing a job usually reserved for animals. And in doing it they are being prevented from going upright, and are being forced to move almost like quadrupeds (Seeler points out that the foremost figure’s left arm nearly touches the ground).

Kollwitz’s earth is dark, heavy, and tough. Plowing it looks like heartbreaking, backbreaking work. The lower line of Kollwitz’s clouds moves in a rounded, shallow, staiystepping motion, and in the left half of the picture plane, there is a curving, stretched-out hole in the clouds. The lines are specific and sensuous, expressive of emotion, reminiscent of the sinuous line commonly found in symbolist art. And yet

24 Ibid., 52-53.
25 Ibid., 60.
Kollwitz’s cloud-line is compressed, flattened, squashed down as though it wants to add weight to the backs of the plowers and suck the light out of their world. The indeterminate daytime sky is leached of color, hanging in a horizontal strip of aquatint gray. In fact the image is built of horizontal strips: the clouds, the stripe of sky, the middle distance of the field, and the foreground, including the plowers, who cast a horizontal shadow on the ground. Only the shallow angle of the plowers’ bodies attempts to break upward through the layers of flat, insistent horizontals.

The image forms an uneasy truce between different kinds of marks. The relatively quiet aquatint clouds are too dark for comfort, and are scratched into with sets of thin, fretful parallel lines, broken by down-angled sweeps of lines that look like windy rain. The lower, earthbound half of the etching is held together by a coarse background, created partly by pressing textured paper into a soft-ground etching base, partly by aquatint, and partly by lines etched in varying weights.26 The darkest areas are blind, velvety black, the lightest areas the lightest a creamy white marred by tiny stray aquatint marks, and in between are textures everywhere from hair-thin cross-hatching to polished iron to gravelly gray tones. The natural world in the image is ill at ease.

In the plowers’ shirts and rolled-up pants, and in the shading on the frontmost plower’s arms, calves, and the plane of his left cheek (visible as he turns his head away

26 Seeler notes that in moving from texturing the background with canvas as in Outbreak to texturing it with paper, Kollwitz is making an even more confident bid for the equality of printmaking and painting (Ibid., 47).
and toward the horizon), there are straining lines that mimic the lines in the clouds. Other than that, the marks here are not cross-hatched etcher’s marks but dark, restless brush-like marks showing the plowed furrows, the plow’s wheel, the deep lines of strain in the plowing traces and the men’s ankles and Achilles tendons, and the back plower’s low-hung, exhausted head, shown only in dark silhouette, with the hair hanging in limp tongues past his face. The only shapes in Kollwitz’s etching that are fully upright are those tongues of hair, and they are sweat-soaked, unkempt, jagged like the toothed edge of a saw, and dragging down.

Figure 2: Kollwitz, Raped (Vergewaltigt), 1907, etching and aquatint, Kollwitz Museum Köln.

Kollwitz’s second etching in the Bauernkrieg series is, even more obviously than The Plowers (fig. 1), a scene of horror. The title Raped (Vergewaltigt, fig. 2) does not leave
us wondering what we are looking at, and if we miss the title, the image itself is full of clues: a woman lies on her back in a vegetable garden, legs rigidly straight and splayed far apart. Her torso is twisted to the left, the shoulders drawn up nearly to her ears, her head thrown so far back that her profile forms a vertical line and the crown of her head rests on the dirt. Her simple dress is torn off her upper torso, shoved down to her ribs, and the hem is up past her knees. The composition’s two darkest shadows are under her left shoulder, where her arm disappears under her body; and under the hem of her dress, between her knees.

And yet for all this obviousness, the woman is hidden among the plants. The image is powerful in part because of the tension between its title, its clear subject, and the wild profusion of plants that almost obscures the central subject. As Seeler puts it, “[T]he tangle of plants [...] cunningly deceives [the viewer’s gaze] about the subject named in the title. The lush covering serves solely to startle the viewer, who is initially confused by the multiplicity of lines, with the discovery.”

This image has one of the most visually active backgrounds in all of Kollwitz’s work, and is the only print of Kollwitz’s in which flowers and vegetation figure prominently. At first the profusion of sunflowers, pumpkin and squash leaves, leeks, lettuces, weeds, and daisies seem to compete with the woman’s body for the viewer’s attention, and hides the woman’s body, giving the impression that this is a scene full of vegetative life. After the shock of

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27 Ibid., 67.
recognizing that the image is of a rape, our sense of the plants changes. Instead of competing visually with her form, everything about the plants ends up referring back to the immobile woman. They refer back to her narratively: she is, in all likelihood, the designer, maker, planter, and tender of this garden. They refer back to her symbolically: especially close to her body, the leaves curve in and out of complex, fleshlike folds. They refer back to her physically: the garden is torn, trampled, violated. It is like an extension of her body, and has suffered something very similar to what she has. Those plants that are not trampled refer back to her by contrast: in their living and flourishing, they show what her assailant has interrupted and laid low. In their vigorous, highly patterned visual movement, they emphasize her total stillness and her inability to respond to the child at the edge of the composition.

The child, standing looking over the fence into the garden, is easy to miss entirely. Only her head is visible, shaded among the sunflower leaves, with her gaze directed down at the ground between the fence and (presumably) her mother. The woman’s body is large, foregrounded, and central; the composition moves our eyes from the top left edge of the print along the slightly down-angled fence-post to the right, into a patch of shadow under the pumpkin leaves and above the woman’s body, to the shadow between her legs, and on to a dark impression in the ground just past her feet.

28 I use “she” for convenience and to avoid the impersonal “it”—but it is not actually clear whether the child is a boy or girl.
where her feet and her assailant’s have torn a hole in the garden bed as they struggled. Kollwitz seeks to help us register the trauma not only of rape, but of a peasant woman raped presumably by a representative of the nobility which also owns her land and her husband’s plowing labor. Whether it has happened to her before or not, we sense that this act of violence is not an isolated incident; what Kollwitz is portraying here is not only a solitary victim, but a raping kind of social order (case in point Kollwitz’s desire, mentioned above, to call the series From the Time of the Peasants’ War).

Some accounts of expressionism emphasize an inwardness of expressionist art, its turning away from external knowledge because, considered untrustworthy, and a reliance instead on internal experience.\(^{29}\) The question of knowing the external world, in the sense of knowing another person’s pain, is highly relevant to this particular image of Kollwitz’s. What would it look like to make an image of a farming woman’s rape in feudal Germany as part of a series on the Peasants’ War and to foreground questions about whether external reality is knowable? It would look like questioning this woman’s suffering, and the suffering of countless others like her. It would look like questioning the brutality of this act. If you look at what is clearly the scene of a rape, and you question it (“was this actually a rape?”) then at best you are doing forensics, and at worst you are practicing a morally reprehensible kind of denial.

\(^{29}\) Vogt and Heinze-Greenberg, “Expressionism.”
In Cavell’s terms, what Kollwitz seems to be interested in here is the work of acknowledgement, and in order to do that work, she has no choice but to move beyond questioning the possibility of such work. And so we have the woman connected, visually and conceptually and narratively, to her trampled vegetable garden (which also shows part of the secondary cost of the rape: destroyed food). We have her child, looking down, frightened, uncomprehending, overwhelmed and probably lacking the resources to acknowledge her mother as she lies before her, rendering her more isolated by the child’s presence than she would be if she were not there, and showing the relational cost of the rape, its trauma not only for the woman but for her family and community. And we have the woman herself, rigid on the ground, in a moment that may have lasted for seconds, or minutes, or an hour (Seeler considers the woman dead). The problem in this image is the rape and the societal structure that made it possible and even likely. The problem is not the categorical unknowability of external reality or of other people.

Kollwitz is taking some of the most basic human questions—hunger, violence, oppression, poverty—and considering them with all the visual sophistication and skill she can muster. This does not make her superhumanly selfless; Kollwitz’s self-portraits are virtuosic, self-conscious, and direct bids for acceptance as a master artist. In many

30 Seeler, Aufstand!, 68.
31 Seeler, in Kollwitz et al., Käthe Kollwitz: Selbstbildnisse = self-portraits, 13-14.
of them, she is making overt attempts to establish herself and win a reputation as an artist, and she has particular anxiety about reaching that goal because she is a woman. The bid for recognition is present in *Raped* (fig. 2)—the woman’s body is placed at impossibly difficult angles, and while this makes vivid the violence she has suffered, it also gives Kollwitz an opportunity to show off her skill at depicting the human figure. The front leg, for example, is stretched out almost (but not quite) directly toward the viewer, so that its steep foreshortening changes all its shapes and leaves it hardly recognizable as a human limb. This supports the image’s ethical goals: it makes visually obvious the way in which the woman has been treated as an object. It also supports Kollwitz’s career goals: it makes visually obvious, as well, her mastery of medium and subject.

Kollwitz is set apart from most of expressionism in that she is a woman. With the exception of Paula Modersohn-Becker, German expressionism (like symbolism and much of Western art) is an almost exclusively male movement. This means both that the artist is presumed male, and that the viewer is presumed male. Wendy Steiner points out the power of these assumptions by recounting the absolute furor caused by Manet’s *Olympia*, a painting of a nude woman lying on a chaise longue and looking straight back at the viewer with calm confidence.\(^{32}\) Her direct gaze and her self-possession overturned the assumption that painters and viewers are male and models are female, and that the

\(^{32}\) Steiner, *Venus in Exile*, 85-94.
artistic and viewing gaze goes one way and one way only. That the painting was met with horror, accusations of indecency, and violent rejection, Steiner argues, is not a response to the model’s nudity or precisely to the visual clues identifying her as a possible prostitute. Steiner argues that the horror expressed both by contemporary critics and by many critics afterward is, instead, a result of Olympia’s openly seductive self-presentation. In other words, the problem is that she knows she is beautiful and desirable, and has taken pains to be so, and that she is looking back at the viewer in full awareness of her own seductive power. The force of the reaction shows the absoluteness (and desperation) with which the one-way male gaze was held as normative: even the possibility of a woman’s looking back and owning her own attractiveness (even a painting of that possibility) was felt as such a threat that it had to be wiped out, disbarred from the canon, forbidden as art.

The female figure in Raped (fig. 2) is not looking back at the viewer. Seeler points out that from the Plowers (fig. 1), whom the image likens to animals, Raped sinks even lower: here the woman has arrived at the level of vegetation. Raped is an even longer and narrower horizontal composition, and an even more nonstandard plate size. The plowers were at a shallow angle, but still an angle; they were attempting to rise. The woman in Raped is not moving at all, and is as level with the ground as it is possible for a human body to be without being buried or decomposed.

33 Ibid., 88.
Seeler sees in the steep foreshortening of the woman’s body a reference to Andrea Mantegna’s *Lamentation of Christ*, a 15th-century tempera painting that shows Christ’s body laid out with the feet facing directly toward the viewer so that the body overall is wildly foreshortened. She points to a similar visual quotation of Mantegna’s Christ (with a composition strikingly similar to Kollwitz’s) in a lithograph by Honoré Daumier, *Rue Transononain, le 15 avril 1834*, which shows a family murdered overnight in a government raid. In both cases, the visual implication is clear: the victim of violence (in Daumier’s case, the family; in Kollwitz’s case, the woman) is visually connected to Christ, and their suffering to his. This is underlined, in Daumier as in Kollwitz, particularly by the lighting: in *Raped* (fig. 2), the whole image is in shadow, except for a patch of sunlight that outlines the woman’s body. Seeler points out that the tension between horizontality and uprightness that characterizes this series is not only about human emancipation and “uprising,” but is also a reference to Christ’s cross. The horizontal beam, she writes, “symbolizes earthly, mortal life, which is to say, death, while the vertical stands for the eternal life of the soul.” I would expand the theology Seeler sees as implied by the cross: the horizontal beam stand for God’s embrace of mortal human life, including violent death in Christ. The vertical beam stands for God’s reaching down to raise humans from the dead, in a way that is inseparably both spiritual and physical.

34 Seeler, *Aufstand!,* 76.
1.3 Fragments and Weilian Attention in Kollwitz’s Work

“Fragment” in the realist or modernist sense both is and is not a helpful word for understanding Kollwitz’s work.35 *Sharpening the Scythe* (*Beim Dengeln*, fig. 3), the third image in the *Peasants’ War* series, is not strictly a visual fragment: though the edges are not ruler-sharp, it is cleanly framed, and the woman’s body ends with the edges of the frame. The wide horizontals of *The Flowers* (fig. 1) and *Raped* (fig. 2) have narrowed inward, drawing into a tight square. Though the woman’s torso is cut off at the ribs and her right arm extends beyond the picture frame, the drawing does not show a solitary hand or a headless, armless torso ending in stumps. Visually, the image is more a close-up than a fragment. The viewer is meant to imagine the woman’s body as extending beyond the picture-frame, and in that sense the image engages the viewer actively.

35 Auguste Rodin is one of the defining artists for the significance of modern fragments. As Miriam Stauder points out, there is a paradox at the heart of Rodin’s use of the fragment, and at the heart of the two main ways in which the fragment is a move into modernity, that is, into a whole new way of understanding art and what it does. On the one hand, Rodin claims the fragment is complete: “a well-made torso contains all life. One would add nothing by attaching arms and legs.” On the other hand, it contains all life precisely by suggesting the whole to which it belongs, and this suggestion requires an act of imaginative completion from the viewer, that involves the viewer in a radically new way, just as the realist fragment does. This, however, is not quite what Kollwitz is up to. (Miriam Stauder, “Die deutsche Rodin-Rezeption um 1900 in Literature, Presse, und Kunst-Öffentlichkeit,” 22. For the Rodin quotation, Stauder cites Werner Schnell, *Der Torso als Problem der modernen Kunst*, 69.)
Figure 3: Kollwitz, *Sharpening the Scythe (Beim Dengeln)*, 1905, etching and aquatint, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

However, the right elbow and the woman’s body below the ribs are not only omitted because we can successfully imagine them ourselves and do not need the image to spell them out. They are also omitted because they are not needed in order to create the web of emotional connections that are key to understanding the piece. In other words, they are left out because they are not essential visually, but even more because
they are not essential emotionally. The image is a fragment, but it is not a fragment of a human figure. Rather, it is a fragment of an entire interconnected social system of oppression and suffering. The moment Kollwitz wants to arrest us in, and impress upon us, is the moment in which this exhausted woman, while doing the very work that her feudal lords want her to be doing, begins seriously considering an alternate purpose for that work. The whole we are meant to imagine as viewers is not so much the woman’s whole body, but rather the woman’s whole social context. In particular, we are meant to imagine the emotional significance of that context for her: we are meant to imagine what it might feel like to be in her situation.

The way Kollwitz uses fragmentation is key to understanding both the kind of attention she herself pays to her subject matter, and the kind of attention she is trying to elicit from (and teach to) her viewers. The whole she means to imply by giving us one zoomed-in part is one we must build imaginatively by emotionally filling out the situations with which she presents us. If we do not do the work of completing her images in this way, they fall totally flat. That work is intellectual: it helps a great deal to know something about feudal structures and German history, and the work of piecing together the clues she gives us in her images is partly mental work. But the imaginative work must go beyond mental or conceptual consideration and become emotional imagining if we are to see Kollwitz’s images well. She demands compassionate attention from us.
It is key to Kollwitz’s images that they demand compassionate work in order to be seen well. This is where Simone Weil’s account of attention becomes profoundly useful for understanding Kollwitz’s images. It is not that Kollwitz’s images posit a dichotomy between mental engagement and emotional engagement, or that they ask the reader for passive surrender, or that they prioritize right-brained responsiveness over left-brained analysis. Instead, they ask for a deliberate intellectual and emotional openness, a posture of receiving, that I have called compassionate attention and that Weil calls simply attention. Such attention is, importantly, not a gift which some people have and some people don’t have. Both Weil and Kollwitz see it as a discipline, and as learnable, and as requiring work. On Kollwitz’s side, the work of attention is important in two directions: there is the artist’s attention in making the piece, and there is the viewer’s attention in seeing it. Kollwitz writes occasionally about what kind of viewer she is hoping to have for her work, but when she writes about her own art in her diaries, the topic is much more likely to be her own working process. And her own attentive practice in making the work is most effectively described not by looking at her words at all, but by looking at her sketches and revisions.

_Sharpening the Scythe_ (fig. 3) is a strong example. There are not only sketches but two different full etchings, both put through numerous states and printings, of alternate layouts for the piece. In each new attempt, the image is increasingly pared down and concentrated, both visually and conceptually. Kollwitz’s first etching, titled _Inspiration_,
shows an old woman with a cloth tied over her head. She is seated, bent over and looking down her straight right arm, which she has stretched out between her knees and in which she is holding a scythe with its blunt top edge dragging along the ground. But she is not alone in the image: she is framed by a massive, bare-limbed male figure, who rests his huge left fist on her shoulder, props his left calf beside her left hip, rests his head just behind her right cheek as though whispering in her ear, and dwarfs her right arm with his own, reaching around and over her arm and engulfing her hand on the scythe as though teaching her how to move it. She is frowning in concentration or abstraction or exhaustion, and he is (as the title underlines) feeding her an idea.36

In the second version, Woman with Scythe (Frau mit Sense), the mythical or symbolic figure of the inspirer is gone. The woman is standing, her head uncovered, propping herself up on a huge scythe. The top, blunt edge rests just along her jawline, and her right hand holds the blade where it is attached to the wooden handle. Her left arm is draped over the top edge of the blade in an eerily trusting posture (considering that the sharp lower edge is inches from her wrist). The trust, it seems, is born from long familiarity and from exhaustion. There is a shadow that may be a whetstone in her limp left hand, but is not doing anything with it.

36 For a detailed listing of the seven different states of the plate (each with multiple printings) and an articulation of the reasons for considering Inspiration as an early draft for Sharpening the Scythe rather than as a freestanding separate work, see Knesebeck, Kollwitz, and Klipstein, Käthe Kollwitz: Werkverzeichnis der Graphik, 271-72.
The third version, now called *Sharpening the Scythe*, zooms in on the woman’s face and shoulders, but it initially maintains the passive arm draped over the scythe. Even though the title implies the work of sharpening, the passive arm indicates abstraction, a daydream, the idea coming to her. Between states five and six of this plate, Kollwitz changes the arm’s posture, pairing the bright, feverish, abstracted eyes with a right hand now holding a definite whetstone.\(^{37}\) The woman gets her idea not from a daemon or symbolic spirit, but from the process of her very own work. There is an inky shadow on the wall behind her head, and the whetstone casts a high-contrast shadow on the smooth, reflective blade. This proves that the woman has paused in her sharpening, because the whetstone is not touching the blade. The tension between the title (which implies active sharpening), and the image (in which the sharpening is arrested), thus carries through Kollwitz’s revisions to the final print, though it grows increasingly subtle.\(^{38}\) The woman’s cheek is still resting against the top edge of the blade in exhausted, disconcerting intimacy, and it is as though the blade itself is whispering to her while she works (or doesn’t work).

The progression from *Inspiration* to the final version of *Sharpening the Scythe* (fig. 3) shows Kollwitz deeply engaged in a process of searching trial and error. Weil’s account of attention fits Kollwitz’s process partly because of the delicate balance in

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 279.
\(^{38}\) Seeler, *Aufstand!*, 82.
Kollwitz’s work between a deliberate, active search, and a quiet receptive openness. The versions of the third plate for the Peasants’ War series follow one another not as though Kollwitz has a perfect vision of exactly what will suit her purpose—not, maybe, as though she even begins with a perfectly clear vision of what her purpose is—but as though she is hunting for the right configuration. On one level she knows exactly what she is looking for; on another level she is feeling her way forward in the dark, testing the figures and their postures, the props, the lighting, to feel their texture, their heft, to see what they weigh and in what direction they pull her. There is a great deal of artistic mastery and purposefulness in her images, but in the discovery of her subject matter and its appropriate form, there is also a humble searching and receiving.

What Kollwitz does with the peasants’ war in Sharpening the Scythe (fig. 3), Simone Weil urges us (humans) to do with each one of our experiences and with each aspect of the world that we encounter. In the essay translated as “On the Right Use of School Studies with a View Toward the Love of God,” Weil sets out a fascinating (though if we think of actually applying it, somewhat terrifying) set of instructions on how students ought to approach their studies. In her notebooks, she states the essay’s central point with uncompromising harshness: the singular and only value in education

39 “Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l’amour de Dieu,” Weil et al., Œuvres Complètes (OC), 4.1, 255-262. English in Waiting for God, 57-65. It is worth noting that although the examples are taken from what sound like primary or secondary school, the only group of students to whom she ever seems to have actively offered this piece of writing were Catholic university students.
is that it helps students develop attention, the kind of attention a poet pays to words, which is also the kind of attention that will prompt us to feed a hungry man if we can.

All other goals for education are uninteresting:

The poet produces the beautiful through attention fixed on some part of reality. Just so with the act of love. Knowing that this man who is hungry and cold genuinely exists just as much as I do, and is genuinely hungry and cold—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.

The authentic and pure values of truth, beauty, goodness, in the activity of a human being are produced by one and the same act, a certain application of the fullness of the attention to the object.

Teaching should not have as its goal anything other than preparing the possibility of such an act through the exercise of the attention. All the other advantages of instruction are without interest.  

The school studies essay expands on this point about the purpose of education. Just as Kollwitz’s *Sharpening the Scythe* focuses closely on one face and one activity, evoking a whole web of social and emotional significance by way of these few particular details, Weil urges students to take the menial tasks of their schooling as an opportunity to do work that reaches far beyond arithmetic in its moral significance. The point of sums is not that “someday you’ll be caught without a calculator,” and the point of Greek

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40 “Le poète produit le beau par l’attention fixée sur du réel. De même l’acte d’amour. Savoir que cet homme qui a faim et froid, existe vraiment autant que moi, et a vraiment faim et froid—cela suffit, le reste suit de lui-même.

Les valeurs authentiques et pures de vrai, de beau, de bien, dans l’activité d’un être humain se produisent par un seul et même acte, une certaine application à l’objet de la plénitude de l’attention.

L’enseignement ne devrait avoir pour fin que de préparer la possibilité d’un tel acte par l’exercice de l’attention.

or Latin translations is not to be able to read Homer or Cicero without a dictionary. The ultimate point of these exercises is that they provide opportunities to learn to pay attention. As the title suggests, Weil sees attention as inseparable from the love of God—we love God by attending to what is real, which points us toward God and helps us become receptive to God. But humanly speaking, the point of learning to pay attention, as Weil describes it in this essay, is that it will make us capable, some day, of paying attention to someone who is suffering.

One day, Weil writes, students will find themselves in the presence of human suffering so powerful that it has destroyed the sufferer’s own sense of her humanity. The world Weil uses in parts of this discussion is *malheur*, which is usually translated as “affliction.” It is different from ordinary suffering, because it implies a suffering that goes so deep as to obliterate the sufferer’s sense of self. And the only thing that can begin to help someone caught in *malheur*, Weil claims, is to be attended to: attention can give an afflicted person back a sense of humanity. But while ordinary attention is difficult, attention to suffering, especially suffering of this magnitude, is astronomically more difficult. In proportion to its stunning potential (restoring a sense of humanity in the sufferer) it is also stunningly costly: attending to such suffering is like dying.

Attention is difficult to learn because paying attention, in Weil’s understanding, is about giving up our comforting illusions and fantasies about reality in favor of actual contact with reality. Schoolwork, she writes to students, can help us learn attention best.
when we fail at it, and are confronted with a version of ourselves that we find uncomfortable and incompatible with our ideal selves. The reason it is worthwhile to stay present to the small death of recognizing oneself as someone who makes careless computational errors, Weil maintains, is that this practice will bring students closer to being able to receive the grace of attention for someone who is suffering deeply. Attention is always a grace: attention is not like a muscular contraction which can be willed. It is not like telling oneself “Concentrate!” It is always something we surrender into. This is especially true in cases when we are practicing extremely difficult or even humanly impossible attention, like attention to someone in affliction.

1.4 Simone Weil’s Attention and Kollwitz’s Work

Kollwitz’s ethical and emotional fascination with embodied humans, especially vulnerable and suffering humans, is deeply connected to Weilian attention. Throughout her career, Kollwitz maintains an ethically demanding fascination with the human body. Kollwitz’s human bodies are neither materialist nor dualist: her willingness to personify realities like death in many of her images show that she is comfortable with a spiritual and nonphysical dimension in human existence, but her bodies are not bodies plus souls; there is never any detachment or even distinction between the two in her work. Instead, she is interested in human bodies as they both are and reveal human beings.

Weilian attention (which I will discuss at greater length in the next chapter) helps make sense of the fusion in Kollwitz’s work between the ethical and the artistic. This
fusion would not have been unusual at all times in history—in a nineteenth-century idealist setting, for example, it made a great deal of sense to assume that art aimed for an ideal in which the ethical and artistic were one. Toril Moi convincingly argues that modernism was not a necessary successor to realism (indeed, because there are so many different kinds of realism, it is hard even to know what it would mean to say that modernism arose out of realism). Instead, she argues that modernism arose out of a reaction against idealism (on the part not only of realists but of many other avant-garde movements). Importantly, the ideal in idealist art is not simply an ethical ideal. That is, idealist art is not art that makes references to ethics. Instead, the ideal in question is an “aesthetic ideal in which ethics and aesthetics are one.”

The various realisms (and many other avant-gardes) share with modernism a reaction against idealism and its fusion of art and morality. Seeler argues throughout *Aufstand!* that the *Peasants’ War* series shows Kollwitz moving not only more and more into modernism, but also achieving her artistic goals more successfully as she adopts

41 Such an assumption is often presented today as a clumsy claim: that literature and art aimed to (and were successful at) morally improving human beings. (All but implied is the even sillier claim that such improvement is quantifiable.) But seeing the ethical and the artistic ideal as connected or fused does not need to imply such moral oversimplification or ersatz science. The fact that it is presented in this way is evidence less that idealism is flawed, and more that idealism lost the historical battle.
43 Ibid., 68, emphasis removed.
modernist artistic strategies. At the same time, Kollwitz is deeply committed to a kind of artmaking that refuses to separate artistic value and ethical value. This commitment to ethical value and artistic value as connected places her in the heart of one of struggles that shaped art as it moved toward modernity. Moi writes that destroying idealism “as a viable aesthetic position” was a large part of the process through which modernism “achieved aesthetic hegemony.” Kollwitz’s commitment to the fusion of aesthetic and ethical values in her work may thus help to explain the ways in which the post-war avant-garde art establishment tacitly rejected her. But it is precisely the seamlessness of Kollwitz’s fusion of aesthetic and ethical ideals that makes her work so compatible with Weil’s account of attention.

Weil’s account of attention also (and relatedly) makes sense of a body of work that is frequently concerned with suffering, and that engages human beings (both subjects and viewers) at two levels: at an ethical level (where it is possible to speak of justice and injustice, and to make ethical demands on behavior) and at an emotional

\[\text{\textsuperscript{44}} \text{“Gerade das [Fehlen einer signifikanten Vertikalen] macht deutlich, dass Die Pflüger in einer Weise der Scholle zwangsverhaftet sind, die ihnen tatsächlich keinerlei Raum zum Aufrichten lässt. Das alles vermittelt sich interessanterweise just durch die „moderne“ Reduktion von Bildelementen und die zunehmende geometrische Abstrahierung der „natürlichen“ Gegebenheiten. Je mehr Kollwitz also hier die Vorgaben der Historienmalerei hinter sich lässt und sich statt des „naturalistischen“, illusionistischen Abschilderns von handelnden Personen an bestimmten Schauplätzen einem modernen Bildkonzept nähert, desto klarer tritt ihre Aussage vor Augen” (Seeler, \textit{Aufstand!}, 61).}
\text{\textsuperscript{45}} \text{Moi, 67-68.}
\text{\textsuperscript{46}} \text{Nedo, “So Much Courage for Pathos Is Foreign to the Present” (“Soviel Mut Zum Pathos Ist Der Gegenwart Fremd”).}

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level (where it is possible for viewers to connect deeply with the experience portrayed in
the image). Kollwitz has been described in terms of empathy and compassion. This is
accurate: Kollwitz does exercise empathy and compassion in her work, in ways that are
obvious both from the work itself and from her writing about her own work. And she
also calls for responses of empathy and compassion from her viewers. But empathy and
compassion fail to convey the element of ethical and moral demand in Kollwitz’s work.

For Weil, attention certainly involves the emotions (it is a whole-person thing), but it
also involves the intellect and the will. It is a gift, and it can be spontaneous (like
empathy), but it is also a discipline.

Attention is a helpful way of understanding Kollwitz because her fusion of art
and ethics is not a simple return to idealism. She does not claim that art is uplifting, or
that it transforms people and makes them better versions of themselves. She does not
write anywhere that art ought to be exemplary, or to show us noble human beings
whom we become inspired to imitate; and her art does not include any straightforward
moral examples. Indeed, if her art were more in line with idealism, she would be less
likely to have provoked Kaiser Wilhelm II’s sharp disapproval (which led to his vetoing
her gold medal at the first showing of the Weavers). And though Kollwitz never writes as
a philosopher or a theologian, her response to the later accusation that she is a gutter
painter includes exactly the elements I have described: a fusion of ethical and artistic concern, and a fusion of the ethical and the emotional.\(^{47}\)

Calling her a gutter painter implied that Kollwitz was prioritizing a social agenda over the concerns appropriate to fine art. She was depicting “low” subjects, and thus failing both to pursue beauty (the aim appropriate to a traditional sense of the fine arts as they came to be understood after the eighteenth-century split between art and craft), and failing to make art that uplifted its viewers (the aim of idealist art).\(^{48}\) In her letter, Kollwitz defended herself by rejecting these categories. First, she turned the definition of “fine art” on its head. It was beauty (an attribute the “gutter painter” accusation implied her work was lacking, and which, as I said, was classically considered the paradigmatic goal for fine art) which she says first drew her to working-class subjects (who were, in calling her a gutter painter, implied as invalid subjects for fine art).\(^{49}\) What she means by beauty, furthermore, is in direct challenge to the traditionalist (and maybe idealist) sense of that word: why, she asks, should she take laws about what is beautiful (whether the ancient Greeks’ or anybody else’s) as authoritative if she has no felt connection to them?

\(^{47}\) Kollwitz and Hinz, Käthe Kollwitz: Druckgrafik, Plakate, Zeichnungen, 4-5.


\(^{49}\) Or if they were not invalid subjects inherently, then at any rate the slur implied that the way she was depicting them invalidated her work as art.
After rejecting his sense of fine art, Kollwitz goes on to describe her attraction to, and work on behalf of, the working class. At first, she writes, it was only an attraction (their beauty) which drew her to depict them; it was only later that a sense of their suffering gave her, additionally, a sense of duty toward them. But even then, Kollwitz does not cleanly separate duty (ethics) and attraction (which in this case spans both aesthetics and emotion). If, faced with realism’s and modernism’s rejection of an idealist connection between art and morality, Kollwitz were simply returning to idealist commitments, she would not have come into conflict with the classical art establishment in this way. Kaiser Wilhelm II would have been highly likely to affirm that art ought to be moral. But not this kind of moral; the particular way Kollwitz fuses art and morality is unacceptable to him.
2. Simone Weil on Attention

2.1 Weil on Attention

Simone Weil says that attention is prayer. It is contact with reality. It means being eaten by God. It is the way to see invisible people, the only way of loving anyone...

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1 For this chapter's overview of what Weil means by attention, I am drawing mainly on the short essays "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" ("Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l’amour de Dieu"), "Human Personality/What is Sacred in Every Human Being?" ("La personne et le sacré") and "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" ("Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu"), as well as passages from her notebooks. The essays "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force" ("L’Iliade ou le poème de la force") and "The Love of God and Affliction," ("L’amour de Dieu et le malheur"), the Letter to a Priest (Lettre à un religieux), some of her other letters (particularly the May 15, 1942 letter to Father Perrin known as her “Spiritual Autobiography” ("Autobiographie Spirituelle"), the late book-length essay The Need for Roots (L'enracinement), and the essays and fragments collected by Camus under the title Intuitions of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks (Les intuitions pré-chrétiennes; the English volume also draws on a separate French volume, La source grecque) are all in the background as well.

Also intimately related to Weil’s account of attention are her understanding of “decreation”; of “non-acting action” (here she draws on the Bhagavad-Gità, on Zen Buddhism, and on Taoism); of force and its effect on human life, relationships, and self-understanding; of hesitation and its importance for humans' dealings with one another; of necessity; grace; suffering; and of the intense, annihilating suffering she calls affliction (malheur). In the next chapter, which deals with tragedy and suffering in the work of Weil and Kollwitz, I will touch on decreation, and will discuss force, hesitation, necessity, grace, suffering, and affliction in more depth. Non-acting action is in the background throughout, and will come into my application of Weil’s ideas to Kollwitz’s work.

2 Œuvres Complètes (OC) 6.2, 297 (Cahier 6, p. 14) and elsewhere (6.2, 315 (Cahier 6, p. 34), 6.2, 435 (Cahier 7, p. 32), 6.3, 228 (Cahier 9, p. 98)). (English: The Notebooks of Simone Weil, trans. Arthur Wills, 205.)


5 This is a synthesis of two claims. First is Weil’s claim that affliction makes people invisible (She makes this claim most explicitly in “Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu” ("Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu") in the section on the Good Samaritan (OC 4.1, 293; English in Waiting for God, 92), where she goes back and forth between saying that the afflicted do not exist as human beings and that they are invisible. She implies the invisibility of the afflicted also in “L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” OC 4.1, 349 (English in “The Love of God and Affliction,” Waiting for God, 69)), where she argues that affliction is so crushing as to be indescribable both by those who have not
or anything, the way of giving back to God the gift of ourselves. It is the eye of the soul. It is what happens when our will surrenders into obedience to what is. It is what happens when our intellect recognizes that which is beyond it and gives itself over. It means being a prisoner (we are all prisoners) who beats his head against the wall of his cell until he passes out, and does it again when he wakes up, and again; until one day he experienced and by those who are experiencing it, which means that it is unrecognizable (the rare people who have come through affliction are in an advantageous position for seeing it—but affliction is so crushing that most people do not in any meaningful way ‘come through it’). For Weil, compassion to the afflicted is therefore impossible unless it is a miracle. Throughout that essay she also argues that affliction makes human beings so repulsive that they become unrecognizable as human beings (invisible) both to others and to themselves. I owe the phrasing of affliction as “making people invisible” to Eric Springsted; for an insightful discussion of affliction, invisibility, and attention, see his Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love (the mention of invisibility in particular is on p. 31, but the whole (short) book is relevant). Second is Weil’s claim that attention or love (she equates the two, as for example in “La personne et le sacré,” Weil, Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres, 32; English in “Human Personality,” Simone Weil: An Anthology, ed. & tr. Siân Miles, 333) see what is invisible (which claim she makes also in the Good Samaritan discussion, in the same place where she says affliction is invisible: “Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu,” OC 4.1, 293, English in “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” Waiting for God, 92).

6 OC 6.2, 297 (Cahier 6, p. 14) and elsewhere; Weil does not to my knowledge state explicitly that attention is the only form of love, but putting her ideas together (attention is love; love is attention; attention is the only form of human agency) implies this conclusion.

7 OC 4.1, 313, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” Waiting for God, 116, and elsewhere. This idea is so pervasive in Weil’s thought that Emmanuel Gabellieri took it as the organizing principle for his extensive study of Weil’s philosophy in Etre et Don.

8 OC 6.3, 228 (Cahier 9, p. 97).

9 This is another pervasive idea in Weil. Two examples are in “Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu,” OC 4.1, 323, English in “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” Waiting for God, 126; or in the notebooks, OC 6.2, 297 (Cahier 6, p. 14).

10 Lettre à un religieux, 40-1, English in Letter to a Priest, 58-60.
finds himself on the other side of the wall without knowing how.\textsuperscript{11} Attention means being a hungry child crying for bread, and refusing to stop crying even when she is told that bread does not exist.\textsuperscript{12} Attention is the way to learn to love as an emerald is green.\textsuperscript{13} It is the place to begin, if one wants to live a life directed by something more than the quest for comfort;\textsuperscript{14} if one wants to escape from a state of sleepwalking into something that can legitimately be called free action;\textsuperscript{15} if one wants to be something more than the human equivalent of a tile falling off a roof, blown and dragged by gravity, to strike the head of an unsuspecting passerby and then shatter on the street.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{11}“La personne et le sacré,” Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres, 30, English in “Human Personality,” Simone Weil: An Anthology, ed. Siân Miles, 331.
\textsuperscript{13}“Dieu n’a pas de mot pour dire à sa créature : je te hais.
Mais la créature a des mots pour dire à Dieu : je te hais.
En un sens la créature est plus puissante que Dieu. Elle peut haïr Dieu et Dieu ne peut pas la haïr à son [ms 15] tour.
Cette impuissance fait de lui une Personne impersonnelle. Il aime, non pas comme j’aime, mais comme une émeraude est verte. Il est “J’aime.”
Et moi aussi, si j’étais dans l’état de perfection, j’aimerais comme une émeraude est verte. Je serais une personne impersonnelle” (OC, 6.4, 171 (Cahier 14, p 14-15)).
\textsuperscript{14}This is a paraphrase of Sharon Cameron’s description of what she finds most attractive about Weil’s writing, in “The Practice of Attention: Simone Weil’s Performance of Impersonality,” Impersonality, 137.
\textsuperscript{15}OC, 1, 316.
\textsuperscript{16}“L’amour de dieu et le malheur,” OC 4.1, 354. (The list goes on. Weil also equates attention with humility in the domain of the intelligence (OC 6.2, 248 (Cahier 5, p. 95) and 383 (Cahier 6, p. 121)); repentance (OC 6.2, 388-89 (Cahier 6, p. 129)); the “lever in the soul,” by which I think she means the thing that is able to help us rise spiritually (OC 6.2, 315 (Cahier 6, p. 34)), and the Holy Spirit (“The Holy Spirit is attention,” OC 6.3, 358 (Cahier 11, p. 59)).
For Simone Weil, attention replaces the will as the central human ethical faculty.\(^\text{17}\) In Iris Murdoch’s concise summation, what Weil means by attention is “a just and loving gaze directed at an individual reality.”\(^\text{18}\) Murdoch expands on Weil’s demotion of the will, saying that this account of attention does not so much invalidate human agency as it changes our understanding of what agency is: “the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments.”\(^\text{19}\) Weil is not shifting our understanding of the will so that the will is something that works continuously rather than in punctuated bursts, or applies to attention rather than to action. The freedom Murdoch mentions is not, for Weil, primarily a freedom of choice, but another kind of freedom, what one might call a freedom of consent. For Weil, the will’s sole job is to surrender, in a move that makes attention possible. The will’s surrender is the beginning of a life of consent to what is there, and attention is the process of ongoing consent. For Weil, the key question is not “What do you choose to do in the cataclysmic, morally significant moment?” Neither is the central question “To what or whom do you choose to attend?” It is not even “Do you choose to attend?” The key question, in Weil’s view, is “Do you choose to learn to attend?” The distinction here is important precisely because


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 36.
of the relationship Weil posits between attention and choice. Until we have learned the
discipline of attention, our control even over our own attention is limited. What we do
have control over from the beginning is making space for attention, training ourselves
for attention, learning to attend.20

For Weil, the process of ethical growth is a process of increasing surrender and
consent to what there is, in which choice becomes increasingly irrelevant. We move
toward goodness by becoming more and more obedient to what is. As Weil puts it, we
should aim to become like the ocean, which follows gravity and other external forces
perfectly, without resistance or complaint.21 What does it mean to be “obedient to what
is”? Can anyone disobey what is? No, Weil writes, not ultimately. We are all like the
ocean in the end, whether willingly or not. We rise when we rise, and fall when we fall,
and do not have the strength to resist being shaped by the surface onto which we fall.
But what we have that the ocean does not have is the ability to obey willingly or
unwillingly. This is where freedom is important to Weil: in our consent.

The difference between being a falling roof tile (which Weil sees as negative) and
being like the ocean (which she praises) is precisely in this consent. By trying to retain
the illusion of a control we can never actually have, we are not only caught in chains of

20 As mentioned above, for Weil, choice is indexed to learning attention, rather than directly to
attention: conscious choice has no direct purchase upon attention. This is a subtle but profoundly
important point for understanding her philosophy of attention.
21 OC IV.1, 355.
physical necessities (which are unavoidable), but we also stay trapped in a chain of spiritual necessity because we are fighting against what is. Thus, like the tile, we fall, harm others, and still shatter. By accepting and consenting to our lack of control over things as basic as the continuation of our own lives, we become like sentient water, which molds to all the forces that act upon it. The difference is not in the tile and water’s subjection to gravity (they both have this) or in their ultimate fates (they may both be broken apart on impact), but in the quality of their falling (willingly or not). As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapters, our consent also affects the ways in which we suffer, and the ways in which we do or do not pass suffering on to others.

The image of the ocean can seem to imply that attention involves a sort of catatonic passivity, but that is not at all how Weil thinks of it. Consent to what is, in Weil’s view, is a life-long and ongoing struggle requiring hard work and continuous training, and usually also significant suffering. Think back to her comments in the “School Studies” essay, discussed in the previous chapter. Rather than becoming less difficult in her way of considering it, schoolwork becomes in some ways more difficult. It is no longer enough to do well on tests, or to memorize one’s Greek vocabulary accurately. Instead, Weil calls students to use their studies as a training ground for prayer and for receiving the supernatural grace that will enable them, at some future point, to meet suffering (Weil writes primarily of someone else’s suffering, but it could
as easily be the student’s own) with attention. It may be most accurate to say that the discipline of attention does not make life easier. It only makes it differently difficult.

Attention is the ability to see what is actually before us, rather than to be misled by our (compelling but false) imaginations about what is there. The struggle toward attention, then, is primarily a struggle with our own illusions.\(^{22}\) This means that what is most valuable to Weil about education, what makes it useful as a training ground for attention, is not its ability to increase our knowledge or give us new skills, but its ability to confront us with the truth about ourselves, often in the form of our own failures. Weil tells students to sit down with a corrected assignment and to look closely at the mistakes they have made. The best mistakes to notice, she advises, are careless, boring ones.

Anything is a worthy subject for attention, but when we are trying to learn attention and want to be reassured that we are in fact attending rather than indulging in fantasies, a reality that is both boring and unflattering is an excellent teacher. Sitting faithfully with the evidence of ourselves as careless, or something else equally ordinary and uninteresting, is a valuable practice because it provides so little ground for self-serving illusions. It gives us no grounds for pride of any kind (even the inverse pride that lives in outsized feelings of shame). If we are attending to one of our own boring failures, we

\(^{22}\) A factually erroneous belief about the world is easy to correct if it does not have emotional ties to our ideas about ourselves, particularly our most cherished ideas: if I think my friend lives on a street called “Lincoln” but she lives in fact on a street called “Ash,” and I am corrected by a reliable source, I will accept the correction readily—unless it is one of my cherished ideas about myself that I have an excellent memory for street names, in which case I may resist correction and persist in my error.
can be fairly confident we are attending to something real, because there is almost no
ground in such material for self-serving illusions.

Weil writes about the Curé d’Ars (Jean Vianney, 1786-1859), who struggled in
academic study and failed in his first attempt to pass his seminary entrance
examinations. Later, however, his ability to teach catechism and counsel others became
so well known that people began flocking to his parish in the thousands.23 She claims
that his academic failure and his power of attentive teaching and counseling are not
simply two separate facts about him but are causally related. For Weil, the Curé d’Ars is
an example of someone in whom protracted failure in study produced a deep power of
attention:

Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day
a light which is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul. Every effort adds
a little gold to a treasure which no power on earth can take away. The useless
efforts made by the Curé d’Ars, for long and painful years, in his attempt to learn
Latin bore fruit in the marvellous discernment which enabled him to see the very
soul of his penitents behind their words and even their silences.24

Weil’s approach to school studies will sound like bad news (and a great and
unnecessary difficulty) to a student who succeeds easily at academic tasks, and whose
identity is built on that success. It may be a great relief, however, to a student who
cannot seem to succeed at academic tasks no matter how hard she tries. Now, failures,

23 “Catholic Encyclopedia: St. John Vianney.”
24 OC 4.1, 257, English in “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love
of God,” Waiting for God, 59.
instead of being dead ends, can be beginning points for making an investment in the
training of a skill whose value is far greater than the value of any grade or degree that
school can offer. Even here, however, the attempt to succeed in academic tasks must
remain real: “When we set out to do a piece of work, it is necessary to wish to do it
correctly, because such a wish is indispensable if there is to be true effort. Underlying
this immediate objective, however, our deep purpose should aim solely at increasing the
power of attention with a view to prayer; as, when we write, we draw the shape of the
letter on paper, not with a view to the shape, but with a view to the idea we want to
express.” Training our attention, then, is something we cannot do without hard work.

Weil writes about attention as a process of morally learning to walk. Children,
when they are physically learning to walk, must learn that they are not the center of the
universe, and that objects will not move out of the way for their convenience. Human
beings begin with a similar delusion in the moral realm: the idea that we are each the
center of the universe, that I am a little god, that the world revolves around me, and that
people and things grow steadily less real and less valuable the further they are away
from me. Weil writes that killing this illusion is a slow, difficult, painful process; it is
also the prerequisite for even the most basic moral movement, and the first step in
learning attention. “In the same way that in our infancy we learn to control and check

25 Ibid.
26 “Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu,” OC 4.1, 300, English in “Forms of the Implicit Love of
God,” Waiting for God, 100.
this illusion [of being at the center] in our sense of space, we should control and check it in our sense of time, values, and being. Otherwise from every point of view except that of space we shall be incapable of discerning a single object or directing a single step.”

In describing the renunciation of this illusion of centrality, Weil outlines her anthropology and parts of her cosmology:

To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the center of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centers and that the true center is outside the world, this is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter and of free choice at the center of each soul. Such consent is love. The face of this love, which is turned toward thinking persons, is the love of our neighbor; the face turned toward matter is the love of the order of the world, or love of the beauty of the world which is the same thing.

Attention is consent to what is, and this consent is love. Both beauty and necessity are aspects of the order of the world. Love consents to joy and delight (the beauty of the world) but it also consents to suffering (the blind force or necessity of the world).

Weil thinks that attending to any aspect of the world (including other creatures, especially humans) will give us opportunities to recognize and let go of our self-comforting and self-aggrandizing fantasies. But she thinks there are certain realities that are especially instructive as tools for learning attention. They include joy, beauty,
suffering, and, as mentioned above, failure. Learning attention is the process of surrendering our illusions in favor of contact with what is, and suffering offers an opportunity for such surrender because a painful aspect of the world is, precisely by being painful, in conflict with something we wish were true. The process of accepting the world where it conflicts with desire is a prime opportunity to learn attention.

Suffering and failure are, to Weil, the most obvious and surefire ways of learning attention. But there is also the way of joy and of beauty. In a deeply personal letter sometimes called her “Spiritual Autobiography,” written to her Dominican mentor and friend Father Perrin shortly before her death in England, she writes tenderly:

Christ granted to his well-beloved disciple, and probably to all that disciple’s spiritual lineage, to come to him not through degradation, defilement, and distress, but in uninterrupted joy, purity, and sweetness. That is why I can allow myself to wish that even if one day you have the honor of dying a violent death for Our Lord, it may be with joy and without any anguish.

True joy is as instructive as suffering in helping us decenter ourselves, and as the passage shows, Weil sees it as an entirely valid and viable path toward faithfulness (which for her is synonymous with the ability to practice attention). However, there is a difficulty for most people with learning attention from joy: because it is a pleasant

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29 As mentioned previously, Weil discusses suffering in two different ways. By “suffering” (douleur) Weil means any kind of physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual pain, but only up to a certain point: for extreme and obliterating suffering she has another term, malheur in French, often translated as “affliction,” which she treats in an entirely different way. More on both suffering in general and affliction in particular will follow in the next chapter.
experience, we are likely to pursue it for selfish reasons, and thus to falsify it and fail to
learn anything at all, because we stay blinded by self-interest. True joy, however, can
never be selfish for Weil, because she understands joy as an experience in which we
gladly lose ourselves, so that joy takes up all our perception, leaving no room to say “I
am the one enjoying this.” Weil thinks that beauty, though similarly pleasant, has some
protection against selfish misuse, because she sees beauty as a reality that inherently
points us beyond itself, by being desirable but unpossessable. In her Letter to a Priest, she
writes about the surrender of the intellect that must accompany the beginning of true
attention, and says that beauty is one of the things that is able to persuade the intellect to
surrender.31

Weil does not talk much about what beauty is. She does not define beauty in a
way that would satisfy most philosophers—one of the only substantive statements I am
aware that she makes about beauty is that beauty is God. But she says more about what
beauty does. Beauty points us beyond itself to the wholeness of the universe, and
ultimately beyond even the wholeness of the universe to God. Beauty is alone among
the three transcendentals because, though it has no words, it has a voice, with which it
can cry out on behalf of goodness and truth.32 Beauty pierces our souls because it makes
us aware of the mystery that the world is entirely matter, and yet also something more
than matter. Most importantly for my argument here, beauty, like suffering, is able to teach us to attend. Instead of confronting us with a painful but unavoidable aspect of reality and burning our illusions out of us as suffering does, beauty woos us, and helps us to let go of our illusions because it offers us something so obviously better that it is suddenly and briefly easy to displace ourselves willingly from the center of our lives.

The work of learning attention usually (though not always) involves enormous expenditures of effort. Whether the work is painful or delightful, it is never the kind of work we can do directly and by force of willpower: as Weil writes in the passage above, the kind of effort involved in learning or practicing attention is different from the kind of effort involved in conscious muscle movements. Weil describes attention as part of “action non-agissante,” non-acting action. This kind of action is not the same thing as passivity; it involves an expenditure of energy. But it is not an expenditure that is analogous to the energy expenditure involved in deliberate bodily movements. Instead, she compares it to childbirth: it involves an extreme effort for the laboring woman, but an effort into which she must surrender, rather than an effort over which she has direct control. (Experiences of childbirth vary so sharply that Weil’s analogy is bound to strike at least some people as wildly inaccurate. The kind of childbirth Weil has in mind is, I suspect, a natural labor that involves relatively few complications. It is labor, in other words, that is enormously strenuous but in which the timing and rhythm of the work are not consciously set by the woman herself. Her conscious choices are largely not
about when to stop or start certain movements or efforts, but rather about how to cooperate with what is happening in and through her body.)

What the metaphor of labor conveys particularly well about attention is the connection Weil makes between attention and obedience. Recent western neuropsychology-based accounts of attention emphasize attention as conscious, directed perception, so that it makes sense for a teacher to admonish a student to “pay attention!” Such an admonition implies that attention is an instant choice, something we can switch on like a flashlight and shine in any direction we want. In Weil’s understanding of the term, however, it makes no more sense to tell a student to “Pay attention!” in a tone that implies that attention is something straightforwardly within the student’s immediate grasp, than it does to tell a pregnant woman to “Go into labor!” Attention is not, for Weil, connected to that kind of obedience, not the obedience of submission to any human authority (including our own orders to ourselves), and not that kind of conscious control. Instead, the obedience that attention helps us enter into is an obedience to what is, similar to a woman’s assent and surrender into labor when it begins, her acceptance of her body and her child’s body and both their needs and demands in this moment. The work of obedience that Weil has in mind is the work of waiting, of seeing what is, of responding. It is the work of reconciling our sense of what is with what we discover is actually there, of letting our old, wrong conceptions die, over and over again. It is taxing

33 OC, 6.2, 479 (Cahier 7, p. 94).
work partly because we are not in control, and we do not know what will be required of us next. It is the work of receiving and responding rather than of inventing and directing.

How is it that attention (especially the learning of attention) is both a matter of receiving and a matter of strenuous effort? To continue the metaphor of childbirth, while there is something receptive (and in some ways, as Weil often seems to claim, almost automatic) about attention, it also involves deliberate and focused expenditures of effort. The key, for Weil, is to know what kind of effort is productive in learning and practicing attention, and what kind is counterproductive. Certain kinds of effort, rather than helping us to learn attention, destroy our ability to pay attention at all: “What could be more foolish than to tense our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem? Attention is something entirely different. / Pride is a stiffening up of this kind. There is a lack of grace (double sense of the word) in the proud. It is the result of an error.” The work of training our attention, and the difficulty of that work, consists partly in learning to distinguish between effort that is “setting our jaws about poetry,” and effort that is actually productive. Attention is connected to “non-acting

\[34\] This can be true, for childbirth, in all kinds of ways—from preparations for birth to the physical work of birth to the complications that may arise in birth, in which a mental energy of judgment and quick action may be required that is not at all passive. 

\[35\] “Quoi de plus sot qu’de raidir des muscles et serrer les mâchoires à propos de vertu, ou de poésie, ou de la solution d’un problème ? L’attention es tout autre chose. / L’orgueil est un tel raidissement. Il y a un manque de grâce (double sens du mot) chez l’orgueilleux. C’est l’effet d’une erreur.” (OC 6.2, 296-97 (Cahier 6, p. 14)).
action” for Weil because the work of attending is often the work of actively refraining (at great cost and with great effort) from doing what our delusions about ourselves and about the world press us to do.

The kind of effort that helps us pay attention is the effort of wanting, wishing, and training.\textsuperscript{36} It is the effort of begging. I mentioned above Weil’s example of the prisoner who beats his head against the wall. This is one of Weil’s characteristically extreme images for the work of attention, and it is worth considering in context:

If a captive mind is unaware of being in prison, it is living in error. If it has recognized the fact, even for the tenth of a second, and then quickly forgotten it in order to avoid suffering, it is living in falsehood. Men of the most brilliant intelligence can be born, live, and die in error and falsehood. In them, intelligence is neither a good, nor even an asset. The difference between more or less intelligent men is like the difference between criminals condemned to life imprisonment in smaller or larger cells. The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his large cell.

A man whose mind feels that it is captive would prefer to blind himself to the fact. But if he hates falsehood, he will not do so; and in that case he will have to suffer a lot. He will beat his head against the wall until he faints. He will come to again and look with terror at the wall, until one day he begins afresh to beat his head against it; and once again he will faint. And so on endlessly and without hope. One day he will wake up on the other side of the wall.

Perhaps he is still in a prison, although a larger one. No matter. He has found the key; he knows the secret which breaks down every wall. He has passed beyond what men call intelligence, into the beginning of wisdom.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Thanks to Toril Moi for this phrasing.

\textsuperscript{37} “Si un esprit captif ignore sa propre captivité, il vit dans l’erreur. S’il l’a reconnue, ne fût-ce qu’un dixième de seconde, et s’est empressé de l’oublier pour ne pas souffrir, il séjourne dans le mensonge. Des hommes d’intelligence extrêmement brillante peuvent naître, vivre et mourir dans l’erreur et le mensonge. En ceux-là l’intelligence n’est pas un bien ni même un avantage. La différence entre hommes plus ou moins intelligents est comme la différence entre des criminels condamnés pour la vie à l’emprisonnement cellulaire et dont les cellules seraient plus ou moins grandes. Un homme intelligent et fier de son intelligence ressemble à un condamné qui serait fier
In this passage, Weil give us a stark picture of the grace that is missing from the proud man’s approach in the previous passage (about setting our jaws). The proud man’s error, in the head-beating passage, is the error of thinking of his intelligence as something other than a prison, and of himself as something other than a condemned criminal. He thinks his intelligence is a house, and because it is large, a mansion; he thinks he is free and self-determining. But he is wrong. The head-beating prisoner is a model, for Weil, chiefly because he refuses to delude himself into thinking of his intelligence as a home. No matter what it costs him to live in this knowledge, the man faces the truth that he is locked up and condemned.

He shows an uncompromising and absolute commitment to this knowledge. He is willing to suffer for it without hope, to beat his head (his mind) against the unmoving...

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We make similar mistakes about capacities other than intelligence—in fact, any ability, skill, or attribute in which we invest our sense of identity, anything we consider as providing us with a place to live, can function for Weil as a prisoner’s cell.
fact of it until he drops unconscious. The hopelessness in the man’s head-beating is important to Weil because it shows that he has taken in the full truth of his position. If he believed that there were weak spots in the wall which his head might be able to break, or that someone were watching through a one-way mirror who was going to open a trap door in the wall if he showed enough commitment to breaking it down, this man would not serve as an example for Weil. That he repeats his head-beating “endlessly and without hope” proves that he is facing not only his situation (that he is a condemned prisoner in a cell) but also his powerlessness to change that situation (which is key to the situation itself). Weil demands that he be wholly hopeless; and yet, at the end of the passage, she gives him hope: “One day he will wake up on the other side of the wall.” For Weil, hopelessness is not key to the process of living with the most painful truths about ourselves because there is no actual hope, no other side of the wall. Hopelessness is key because the way toward the actual hope (the way through the wall) requires our going through hopelessness, in order to give up all the hope we have in our own ability to make ourselves, and our position in the world, other than they are.

The proper setting for the exercise of our agency, when it comes to attention, is in our choosing to train for it, learning to prepare and wait for it. We have most direct agency in the very beginnings of this process, where the will is actively involved: it is the will that makes the first step toward allowing attention, or the possibility of attention, by
consenting to let itself become obsolete.\textsuperscript{39} In the passage above, it is the will that chooses (once confronted with the truth that its cherished abilities are actually prisons) to live in truth or in falsehood. The will either faces the truth that intelligence (or some other ability) is a prison, or lies to itself in order to live in a more comfortable delusion. Perfect attention is the state in which choice has become unnecessary because our obedience to what is (which is really obedience to God) is so complete that we no longer see the world as an array of varied choices. The prisoner knows that the only thing that can save him is to get out of his prison. Whether he has hope of succeeding is irrelevant, because nothing else matters. In another example, the child keeps begging for bread even when she has been told there is none, because she knows she will starve without it. Even the willingness to move toward such surrender requires a movement toward humility, because it involves a steady diminishment of our sense of particular selfhood (as Weil puts it, the part of me that says “I,” my sense of the importance of its being \textit{me} rather than someone else who takes this step or does this action, my identification of self with things like intelligence). This is why Weil writes that the virtue of intellectual humility is the same thing as attention.\textsuperscript{40}

Attention, for Weil, is the deepest expression of the image of God in humans, because she understands God’s act in creating as the paradigmatic case of completely


\textsuperscript{40} \textit{OC}, 6.2, 348 (Cahier 6, p. 77).
generous gift. She sees our attending (when we attend) as three things: a participation in God’s giving, a part of the gift itself, and a giving-back to God of the one thing we have to give: our selves (and giving our selves is only possible if it includes the surrender of our false, little-god selves). Choice becomes obsolete in attention not because we become automatons and lose our freedom, but because attention is the place where obedience and freedom are the same thing. We lose ourselves in attention because attention is the fulfillment of who we are. The head-beating man is in fact condemned, and in fact imprisoned. There is, in Weil’s view, no way out for him—except the way of attention.

2.2 Attention and Action

Weil’s insistence on attention as an openness toward what is rather than a search for any particular thing, her description of attention as a form of “non-acting action,” and her commitment to thinking with Plato have led many scholars to consider her a predominantly contemplative philosopher. Such a description, however, misses Weil’s deep philosophical and political investment in action. Her commitment to attention is inseparable from her commitment to action: she sees attention as the necessary and

41 See, for example, Mary Dietz: “I have...suggested that attention has a number of predominant features: it is contemplative without being self-conscious, a waiting rather than a searching for, a quiescent openness to illumination, a certain kind of silence, a will-not-to-will. In all of these respects, attention recalls the vita contemplativa revered by so many ancients and moderns alike—Plato’s thaumatezein, Augustine’s “soul set free,” the “openness to all” exalted by St. John of the Cross, Bergson’s “l’âme ouverte,” Heidegger’s “releasement” or Gelassenheit. Without doubt, this defense of attention is a blow struck for a particular kind of moral agency in the political as well as the personal realm” (Mary Dietz, Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil, 100).
sufficient condition of free action. Take, for example, this passage: “The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.”\textsuperscript{42} Or this, describing the robbed man in the parable of the Good Samaritan, beaten and left by the road, who “is only a little piece of flesh, naked, inert, and bleeding beside a ditch; he is nameless, no one knows anything about him. Those who pass by this thing scarcely notice it, and a few minutes afterwards do not even know that they saw it. Only one stops and turns his attention towards it. The actions that follow are just the automatic effect of this moment of attention.”\textsuperscript{43} What is striking in both cases is Weil’s insistence that attention alone is enough to produce right action. No extra conditions or intermediate steps are required.

When Weil claims that aesthetic attention and ethical (action-producing) attention are one and the same, this seems axiomatic for her, and difficult to break down into pieces that could be argued, supported with evidence, or refuted. In \textit{Simone Weil: L’attention et l’action}, Joël Janiaud manages to break down exactly that claim, and elaborate it in a way that makes it more, rather than less, compelling. By examining the inseparability of action and attention for Weil, Janiaud places Weil at the intersection of


the active and contemplative life. He begins with Weil’s description of humans’ default state as “sleepwalking.” Attention, Weil argues, is what enables us to take actions that are more than sleepwalking, or more than mere automatic responses to unexamined impulses.

By showing that Weil thought about the gray areas where attention and will do not come cleanly apart, Janiaud provides a fuller picture of what Weil sees as freedom, which is key both to her understanding of the will and of attention. Weil thinks that attention to anything is valuable, and that in a sense we can’t start in the wrong place so long as we are trying to pay attention to things as they are. But Janiaud points out that by “attention,” Weil means free attention, active (as opposed to passive) attention. Free or active attention is attention that is not passively following impulses, enslaved to obsession, or crippled by avoidance. Weil’s point is not that we ought to exercise constant conscious freedom of willed choice over where to direct our attention; the kind of freedom she seeks is often not conscious at all. But in order to practice Weilian attention, we must escape the clutches of patterns like obsession or avoidance that lock our attention into rigid, repeating loops.

Janiaud points out the importance of bodiliness for Weil’s thought on attention, and uses her example of learning to ride a bicycle to show the importance of habit in enabling us to pay attention. The cycling example serves two purposes: first, it gives a vivid image of what Weil means by “free action” and “free attention.” But second, it
shows that attention without action is just as impossible as the reverse, and that talking about them as separable from one another is nonsensical. Action is a condition for attention just as attention is a condition for action. The beginning cyclist, Weil points out, is fascinated by obstacles as a bird is fascinated by the snake that is trying to eat it, and is so focused on her own movements that she cannot successfully attend to the process as a whole. In other words, her attention is obsessive and entrapped, and as a result so is her action (she crashes into the obstacle). The skilled cyclist, by contrast, has had her attention freed by the habit of practiced movement, so that her attention is taken up neither with the obstacles that loom in every direction, nor with controlling the individual movements of her body parts. She is free to attend to what is outside her, and thus free to direct her body (and through it, her bicycle) as she chooses, avoiding obstacles simply by taking a clear path. She has “become the movement.” The “fluidity of the body” displayed by a practiced cyclist is a necessary condition (in cycling and, for Weil, in all human endeavors) for the fullest kind of attention. Such bodily fluidity represents the unity of thought and action, and can be acquired only through habit (that

44 “Il est fasciné par l’obstacle comme l’oiseau par le serpent. Lorsque notre corps n’est pas formé, nous faisons attention aux actions que nous devons éviter” (Janiaud 19, Weil OC I, 386). Weil speaks also of a “moral vertigo” (“vertige moral”), according to which the mere thought of a mistake frequently causes one to fall into that mistake (“l’idée d’une faute fait souvent qu’on s’y précipite,” OC 1, 389).
45 Janiaud, 21.
is, practice). Janiaud summarizes, “The novice cyclist is preoccupied, via his concern about obstacles, with his own capacities: he has not yet become the movement itself. Once habit is acquired, attention is no longer concern for oneself.”

By hanging her whole ethics on attention, Weil is placing enormous trust in the process of learning attention as a discipline of moral formation, and trust in the world to guide our attention as we learn. She is explicit about this trust. In her notebooks, she writes repeatedly that attention is the only way toward the good, and that it is the whole way. It does not matter where we begin in paying attention. Attention itself, things as they are, genuinely encountered (or more and more genuinely encountered) will teach us what to attend to, will lead us to act justly, will guide our attention more and more toward what matters most. Weil trusts the world to point us to God if we attend to it, to be a form of revelation, the “book of the world.” This does not mean that every conclusion each one of us comes to in our process of reading what we see will be true. We can attend to something and remain in error about it, because as we learn to attend our attention is not perfect, and the truth revealed to us is not complete. But it is on the

46 Weil cites Hegel: “In skill[ful movement], the body is penetrated by the spirit and becomes its instrument, to such an extent that it expresses faithfully, for example, the representation of a series of notes, by letting itself be penetrated without resistance, like a fluid” (“Dans la dextérité le corps se trouve penetré par l’âme, et il devient son instrument, à tel point que la représentation d’une série de notes, par exemple, le corps l’exprime fidèlement, et en se laissant pénétrer sans opposer de résistance et comme un fluide” (La Philosophie de l’esprit, tr. A. Véra, § 411, t. I, pl 421; OC I, 384, cited by Janiaud, 20.).
47 “L’apprenti cycliste est préoccupé, au travers de son souci des obstacles, de ses propres capacités : il n’est pas encore devenu le mouvement lui-même. Une fois que l’habitude est acquise, l’attention n’est plus souci de soi” (Janiaud 20-21).
way to being complete, and it will become more complete, and less mistaken, the further we go along the way of attention. Weil thinks that attention is the way toward the truth because she believes that this is the way God has set up the world. She sees God as hidden from humans, but also as wanting to be found (or rather, wanting to find us). Attention, with its surrender to what is and its dogged determination to stick with the truth no matter the cost, is an opening toward letting God find us. This makes it the only reliable way toward the truth. False conclusions along the way are less important to Weil than the overall direction. And the overall direction, if we are doing the work of learning attention, is toward truth, beauty and goodness—and each of these lead us toward God.

Weil is well aware of the human capacity for self-deception. If one undertakes Weil’s program of learning attention, it is entirely possible to deceive oneself even about whether or not one is paying attention. Self-deception is what attention resists (and vice versa), and it is why attention is so difficult to learn and to practice. Weil’s faith in attention is not born out of philosophical or ethical or theological recklessness. Instead, it is born out of a conviction that, however difficult this way is, attention is the only viable path, the only way to get where we need to go. Weil writes:

The will only has power over a few movements of a few muscles, connected to the idea of displacing nearby objects. I can will to place my hand flat on the table. If interior purity, or inspiration, or truth in thought were

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48 OC 6.2, 429 (Cahier 7, p. 23).
necessarily connected with attitudes of this kind, they could be objects of the will. Since this is not the case, we can only beg for them. Begging for them is believing that we have a Father in heaven. Or stop desiring them? What could be worse? Interior supplication is the only reasonable way, because it avoids tensing muscles that have nothing to do with the matter. What could be more foolish than to tense our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem? Attention is something entirely different.

Pride is a stiffening up of this kind. There is a lack of grace (double sense of the word) in the proud. It is the result of an error.

Attention, at its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.

Bound up in it is a different freedom than that of choice, which is on the level of the will. Namely grace.

Paying attention to the point where one no longer has a choice. Then one knows one’s dharma.49

Weil uses the term dharma repeatedly in reflections connected to attention, and it is worth tracing out some of the work this term does for her. Above I wrote that Weil sees attention as the only way to “get where we need to go.” In this passage, Weil uses dharma to refer to that where. It sums up the life lived by attention, which is also the life.

49 "La volonté n’a prise que sur quelques mouvements de quelques muscles, associés à la représentation du déplacement des objets proches. Je peux vouloir mettre ma main à plat sur la table. Si la pureté intérieure, ou l’inspiration, ou la vérité dans la pensée, étaient nécessairement associées à des attitudes de ce genre, elles pourraient être objet de la volonté. Comme il n’en est rien, nous ne pouvons que les implorer. Les implorer, c’est croire que nous avons un Père dans les cieux. Ou cesser de les désirer ? Quoi de pire ? La supplication intérieure est seule raisonnable, car elle évite de raidir des muscles qui n’ont rien à voir dans l’affaire. Quoi de plus sot que de raidir des muscles et serrer les mâchoires à propos de vertu, ou de poésie, ou de la solution d’un problème ? L’attention est tout autre chose.

L’orgueil est un tel raidissement. Il y a un manque de grâce (double sens du mot) chez l’orgueilleux. C’est l’effet d’une erreur.

L’attention, à son plus haut degré, est la même chose que la prière. Elle suppose la foi et l’amour.

Il s’y trouve lié une autre liberté que celle du choix, laquelle est du niveau de la volonté. À savoir la grâce.

Faire attention à ce point qu’on n’ait plus de choix. On connaît alors son dharma” (OC 6.2, 296-97 (Cahier 6, p. 14)).
lived in a freedom beyond choice, a life of grace, which “presupposes faith and love.”

The whole passage, in spite of its emphasis on things like virtue, poetry, and the solutions to (possibly intellectual) problems, also presupposes action. When Weil writes, for example, that one pays “attention to the point where one no longer has a choice,” this either implies that one no longer has a choice about what to do (or how to act), or that one no longer has a choice about what to attend to, in which case attention is itself a form of action. The passage assumes the same point Weil made in the notebook entries quoted above about the continuity of attention and action (“To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.”).

Etymologically, dharma descends from two Sanskrit nouns, both found in the very oldest Sanskrit texts, and both spelled dharman but accented differently: the neuter dhArman (stressed on first syllable), which means “support, (firm) hold” and the masculine dharmAn (stressed on second syllable), meaning “orderer, keeper, supporter.” The masculine noun dharma came into use several centuries later, and means “statute, order, law, custom, rule, right.” Dharma came to be used as a technical term meaning “religious law, religious requirement,” which is why it is sometimes also translated as “duty” or even “religion” (Buddhism and Hinduism are both sometimes

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50 I am indebted to correspondence with Antonia Ruppel for the etymological information in this paragraph.
referred to as “dharms”) or “right action in context.” There are different kinds of dharma, for example caste dharma (if one is a warrior, it is one’s dharma to fight when the king commands), or family dharma (right behavior as a daughter, father, wife, son, descendant of one’s ancestors, etc.). The meaning “support” in dharma’s etymological background refers to society: dharma “holds together and supports society,” and “when all members of a society act according to their dharma, that society is firm and well-supported.”

Of course, there are situations when one finds oneself in multiple roles, the dharma of which pull one simultaneously toward incompatible paths. The most famous of these in the Hindu tradition is found in the Bhagavad-Gîtâ, when the warrior Arjuna is agonizing and soliciting Krishna’s advice over whether or not to go into war against his own family members in a just cause (his dharma as a warrior is to fight; but his family dharma is to seek the welfare of his family, not to kill them). Krishna says yes, Arjuna should fight: because this is Arjuna’s particular dharma and it is for him not to justify himself but to obey. “This is,” Krishna says, “the prescribed action of which one acquits oneself with the sole thought that it must be done, excluding all attachment and without considering its fruit.”

Dharma, then, is a word that can bear the weight Weil places on it when she ends her passage “Then one knows one’s dharma.” Dharma is more than a

51 Email correspondence with Antonia Ruppel, October 25, 2017.
set of conventions or expectations for people in one’s caste or societal role. It is also the
particular, contextual right action for me now, given the web of complicated conflicts in
which each of my actions is entangled. And it is the tissue of such right actions that
makes up my life, if I live it faithfully, rightly, attentively.

Based on readings of her writing on transforming the social conditions of work,
Janiaud distils a kind of formula for what, to Weil, counts as “action efficace” or
“effective action,” a term Weil often uses when she discusses what kind of revolution we
should strive to achieve in order to improve societal conditions especially for the
working class and those displaced and uprooted by violence. By “action efficace” Weil
means, on the one hand, action that is effective in producing a desired end, and on the
on the other hand, action that is worthy of being called action at all (that is, action that is
not mere sleepwalking). Effective action is action that results from attention to necessity,
and which one believes to be the will of God, and to which one can therefore abandon
oneself. By “necessity” Weil means things as they are, doing what they must do. In other
words, the attention involved in producing effective action is attention to what is. It is a
sober wakeful awareness of things as they are, rather than we dream and wish they
were. It is waking from the sleepwalker’s dream and looking around. By “the will of
God,” Weil does not mean an inner voice whispering marching orders. She does not
exclude the possibility of direct mystical communication of God’s will or of inner
intuitions, but what is essential before any of these is that one has done (and is doing)
the work of attention to necessity, in order to develop a sense of one’s own place in the
order of things, and of where one fits in this order and what, therefore, one ought to do.
Acting in accordance with what one believes to be the will of God can happen without
ever having emotional experiences of God at all. An effective action is one to which one
can “abandon” oneself in the sense of a total commitment, of doing the action with one’s
whole self, rather than pretending that one can somehow both do and not do the action,
and doing it partway. Abandoning oneself to an action is actually acting. Weil’s sense of
what counts as effective action, then, lines up strikingly well with the idea of dharma: an
“eternal and god-given law, that which holds society together,” and in the context of
which “it is our dharma to a) understand what our dharma is and b) then fulfil our
dharma.”

Dharma thus allows Weil to fit into one word a sense of right action in context, of
fulfilling an obligation by acting out faithfully exactly what one is. But as Janiaud points
out, dharma lets Weil do more than speak concisely. It also lets her describe right action
in a morally compromised context where abstract perfection is impossible. Janiaud
writes that dharma incorporates moral ambiguity and complexity because it is
unavoidably social, and this social element is precisely what dharma adds to Weil’s

53 Email correspondence with Antonia Ruppel, October 25, 2017.
account of effective action. We never act in abstract settings where anything can be considered straightforwardly and cleanly good or bad, and where our actions come simply apart from the rest of the world and can be considered in isolation. We act in situations that follow after all kinds of choices on our part and on others’ parts that have set a stage in which good and evil are so tangled up together that we can only ever choose the course of action which seems to us to be the strand containing the least evil.

“In a given situation,” Weil writes, “every possible action includes a certain proportion of good and of evil, or rather, since the proportion is not measurable, a certain mixture. Dharma is a rule for choosing the suitable mixture for a person.” Janiaud writes that in her discussion of dharma and of Arjuna’s dilemma, Weil is recognizing the fact that any reference to the supernatural has to become incarnate in an imperfect social context where one is always confronted with choices. In light of this, one must choose the least bad solution, and behave with detachment—which means both a maximum commitment, and an abandonment of the claim to a signature of the act. In fact action, even if it is non-acting, cannot in the end do without a reference to an agent who must make choices, and who has had to make choices, prior to the context of his present action.

54 The idea of dharma has enormous relevance for Weil’s L’enracinement. Her plan for reconstructing French society after WWII owes a great deal to the idea of dharma, from her focus on the idea of human obligations (rather than rights) to the idea that societal order is one of the basic needs of the human soul.

55 “Dans une situation donnée, toute action possible comporte une certaine proportion de bien et de mal, ou plutôt, la proportion n’étant pas mesurable, un certain mélange. Le dharma est une règle pour le choix du mélange convenable à un homme” (OC VI.1, 326 (Cahier III, p. 68)).

56 Janiaud, 93. Janiaud points out that Weil seems not to be bothered by the fact that Krishna advises Arjuna to enter into war, whereas she wants to delete the entire Old Testament from the Bible because it seems to present a people (Israel) who believe themselves justified in doing violence because they are God’s chosen people. His explanation is that Arjuna is not portrayed as
2.3 Attention and God

Writing on Weil which suggests in its title that it will be about attention rarely stays fully on topic. There are three reasons for this. One is that attention in Weil’s account is, by her own description, a difficult idea to grasp, and impossible to grasp directly (or maybe not actually something that can be “grasped” at all but only received). Attention involves our agency, but in an indirect and long-term way rather than in a direct and immediate way. Weil talks about attention by analyzing poems, plays, epics, and Zen stories, and by constructing vivid images, metaphors, analogies, sometimes even short allegories, rather than by writing linear definitions. When she makes statements that seem simple (“attention is prayer”) they turn out, upon examination, not to be at all straightforward: to take us, for example, from what we thought was philosophy suddenly into devotional theology. Thus, to write on attention following Weil herself is to seem to stray in and out of the subject, to catch it in focus for a moment and then be pursuing it again.

The second reason why writings on Weilian attention do not stay on topic is that their topic is vast. As Rolf Kühn points out in *Leere und Aufmerksamkeit* (“Emptiness and being inspired by a partisan God, but rather as acting under constraints and trying to do the least harm possible (ibid., 92).
Attention” or “The Void and Attention”), attention is the thread that runs through all of Weil’s thought, connecting ideas like decreation to everything from the cross of Christ to factory work to Plato’s cave to syndicalist politics. Conceptually, attention connects everything to everything for Weil, and so it is difficult to write about attention from her perspective without leaping from topic to topic, or without isolating it artificially in a way that leaves it sounding purely theoretical.

Thirdly, not only does attention form conceptual connections, but it is in fact Weil’s way of thinking about other things. Thinking rightly about God, or love, or beauty, or creation, or relations between human beings, or action, or penal justice, or one’s own sense of self, is only possible in Weil’s view by practicing attention. Attention is Weil’s lens for examining other things, and we understand the shape and nature of the lens only partly by looking at it, and largely by looking at things through it.

These difficulties in writing about attention can make scholarly disagreements on attention difficult to place: they are only sometimes disagreements on what attention is, and much more often disagreements over the way scholars relate certain of Weil’s ideas to one another through attention. One of the key points of divergence in understanding Weil’s thought as a whole has to do with the relationship between philosophy and theology in her work. Her account of attention is one place where the two are nearly impossible to separate. It is thus impossible to consider attention in the context of Weil’s
thought without facing the question of how to deal with the way Weil connected
attention and God.

Weil’s central emphasis on God has led some scholars to question whether her thought can be considered philosophy at all, and others to question the way academic disciplines have tried to draw hard lines between philosophy and theology.\(^{57}\) One key scholarly disagreement here is over Weil’s use of the term “the supernatural.” Is it an exit from philosophy? A well-taken critique of philosophy? A lapse into foundationalist thinking? Is it metaphysics? Is that good or bad? Weil’s reception history is full of tension between scholars who prioritize the historical, political, and activist aspects of Weil’s thought, and those who prioritize the mystical and contemplative aspects. There are those who read her as a faithful and constructive Platonist, and those who read her approvingly as a nihilist. There are those who read her as inhabiting the contradiction between mediation and decreation, and those who criticize such a presentation as too static, insisting instead that we understand her writing as a whole unified by the way each part refers to the supernatural, and tracing the development of its unity from roots in Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Alain, through a deep encounter with universalist...

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\(^{57}\) For example, in *Simone Weil*, Palle Yourgrau points out that Mary Warnock, when editing the recent anthology *Women Philosophers*, excluded Weil, because “to put it crudely,” she seems “to rely more on dogma, revelation or mystical experience than on argument” (Women Philosophers, xxxii). For a much more nuanced and insightful discussion of the relationship between philosophy and theology in Simone Weil’s thought, see Eric Springsted’s introduction to *Late Philosophical Writings*.
Catholic theology, frequently in conversation with Proudhon and Marx. In *Etre et Don*, Emmanuel Gabellieri points out that the argument over Weil’s use of the term ‘supernatural’ may be the central question for future Weil scholarship. The question as he puts it is whether Weil’s use of that term can, cannot, or must be considered as belonging inside the domain of philosophy. The argument is peripheral to my project insofar as it is an argument over disciplinary boundaries, but relevant to my project insofar as it is an argument over the extent to which Weil can faithfully (or even usefully) be read without reference to the theological dimensions of her work.

In particular, of course, I am concerned with this question as it applies to Weil’s account of attention. A basic version of Weil’s account of attention can easily be put in secular terms: attention is a posture of openness toward a particular aspect of human or nonhuman reality, a posture that requires willingness to sacrifice one’s own illusions (particularly the self-protective ones) for the sake of perceiving the reality of what is beheld. Not only can Weilian attention be stated in a basic way without reference to God, it can also be practiced without requiring any initial reference to God. (In fact, Weil frequently observes that reference to God can easily be a hindrance to the practice of attention because our ideas of God so often belong precisely to the self-serving illusions that genuine attention resists.)

58 This overview of Weil’s reception history is largely a much-condensed version of the first half of Emmanuel Gabellieri’s excellent introduction to *Etre et Don.*
Iris Murdoch, Peter Winch, and Sharon Cameron provide excellent examples of readings that go far beyond this basic secular statement of Weilian attention, while remaining essentially nontheological. Murdoch remains close to Weil’s thought and yet separate from God-talk by matching Weil’s Platonism. Murdoch is not a Weil scholar: she never to my knowledge wrote any one piece that is centrally about Weil. Instead, she draws key ideas in her own moral philosophy from Weil’s thought. In thinking with Weil in this way, Murdoch ends up making, on the one hand, some of the most usefully condensed and insightful restatements of Weil’s thought I have read; and on the other hand, some of the most thoughtful and striking elaborations and applications of Weil’s thought to everyday life. In “The Idea of Perfection,” for example, Murdoch takes up Weil’s claim that attention, rather than the will, is the central human ethical faculty, and elaborates a short theory of attention-based ethics in the context of English moral philosophy. As quoted above, she writes that, for Weil, “attention is a just and loving gaze directed at an individual reality.” The sentence is so directly supportable from Weil’s own writings that I was initially surprised to find Weil did not write it verbatim; it is for some purposes a better one-sentence introduction to Weil’s idea of attention than anything Weil herself did write. For Weil, justice and love are deeply connected and sometimes interchangeable terms. Attention is just because it does the difficult work of refusing illusions in order to make greater contact with what is. Attention is loving
because it is an actively receptive posture toward what is, a willing receptiveness that seeks not to change what is there but to know it more fully.

Considered from a theological standpoint, Murdoch’s weakness as an interpreter of Weil is put well by Stanley Hauerwas: Murdoch is “trying to be Christian without God.” Or, as Alan Jacobs has it, there is the question of “Go(o)d” in Iris Murdoch. 59 What they both mean is that Murdoch is interested in Christianity (or any theology or religion) as scaffolding in the pursuit of the Platonic Good. Particular beliefs about God are training wheels for moral and spiritual beginners; they are acceptable while needed but should be discarded upon reaching sufficient maturity. Jacobs points out that Murdoch herself claimed to be “a Christian Buddhist, or Buddhist Christian: she envisions a Christianity in which Jesus plays the same role that Buddha does in the more sophisticated forms of Buddhism, that of (at most) an avatar of a transcendent Good that he cannot exhaust or even adequately represent.” 60

While Weil is also deeply Platonic, and also drawn to Buddhism, Weil’s position is subtly (but profoundly) different from Murdoch’s. When Weil writes that a certain kind of atheism is purifying, what she means is that certain conceptions of God are so far from the truth that it is more truthful to have no conception of God. But it is atheism, for Weil, rather than religiosity, that is the scaffolding. Once “purifying atheism” has

59 Jacobs, “Go(o)d in Iris Murdoch.”
60 Ibid.
burned away the pernicious conceptions of God (which all have to do with believing in a god small enough that he allows us to retain our illusory position at the center of the world), the atheism falls off, like training wheels, and gives way to “the void of God which is fuller than our plenitude.” 61 When Weil writes that God does not exist, she does not mean there is no God. She means that “exist” is too small a word, that it falsifies our conception of God—though “conception” is also too small a word.

In *The Just Balance*, Peter Winch approaches Weil through Wittgenstein rather than through Plato. The book is a study of Weil’s thought that leads (chronologically and topically) toward Weil’s account of justice from which the book takes its name, and puts her into conversation with Ludwig Wittgenstein. It consists of short chapters, each one made up of a close reading of one or more texts in Weil. Winch’s levelheaded and perceptive analysis of Weil’s thought relates idiosyncratically to the idea of the supernatural in Weil, as he himself admits. As he goes along, Winch brackets out mentions of the supernatural (or of God), noting that he will return to them later because he is not sure of their relation to philosophy proper and wants, for the time being, to stay squarely in philosophy.

When he does finally discuss the supernatural, he interprets the term as a functional part of Weil’s philosophical language that is useful without designating any

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61 “Le vide divin plus plein que la plénitude est venu s’installer en nous” (*OC* 6.3, 233, Cahier 3, 163).
accessible reality. He compares Weil’s use of “the supernatural” to saying parallel lines meet “at infinity,” which is not claiming infinity as a place that, if one could get to it, would contain their meeting point. His excellent book ends on a less-than-satisfying note, claiming that when Weil writes of a perspective from “beyond space and time…where our Father dwells,” “the point of this sort of language is to provide a way of expressing the connections between various attitudes, interests, strivings, aspirations, which are all part of our ‘natural history.’”  

This is true in the sense that Weil thinks God works in and through nature without violating it. But if Weil had wanted a placeholder for connections between natural strivings and aspirations, it seems likely she would have come up with a clearer, more impersonal term than “our Father.”

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62 Winch, The Just Balance, 211.
63 In their excellent chapter “Winch on Weil’s Supernaturalism” in Spirit, Nature, and Community, Diogenes Allen and Eric Springsted point out that it “seems incredible that Winch, after spending two hundred pages trying to get us to believe that Weil genuinely advanced in her philosophical thinking because she quit thinking in foundationalist ways, would then himself recommend, explicitly or by oversight, a foundationalist sort of conclusion” (82-3). They make several important points that clarify Winch’s reading of Weil and his concerns in that reading. Key among their claims is that Winch is resisting the idea of “the supernatural” as an explanation, as something primarily concerned with justifying or proving claims. Instead, Winch thinks that it is concerned with faith, which means with something “to which one recognizes questions of justification to be irrelevant” (Winch, quoted in Allen and Springsted, 85). This is clearly supported in Weil’s writing; as Allen and Springsted note, “To use the example of affliction again, one’s love does not depend upon something one knows about the world—it does not depend upon the ‘hearing of ear’—it simply is the extraordinary response of love in an unlovely situation” (85).

As the authors also point out, however, there are clearly times when faith uses the language of the supernatural in an explanatory way, to point to a world outside our world, in a way philosophy does not know how to talk about. Weil does this too; for all her insistence on the abject failure of our language and concepts to convey anything substantial about God, she disagrees hotly with a Durkheimian view of God as a social product, the effervescence and glory
In her chapter on Weil in *Impersonality*, Sharon Cameron insists that the cultivation of attention is, for Weil, fundamentally naturalistic, even though it is aiming for virtue, which is, for Weil, supernatural. Cameron connects Weil’s move toward renouncing an illusory self (or the part of herself which says “I”) with her move toward renouncing a representable or knowable God. Cameron connects both of these in turn with experiences of suffering, because the key fact about suffering for Weil is that it has no significance, no “face” or meaning, that it can’t be explained (like God because God is too big for explanation, and like our illusory selves because they don’t actually exist). Cameron is not approaching Weil from a Wittgensteinian perspective, and does not separate out the supernatural or Weil’s mentions of God to be addressed at the end of her piece. Neither her interpretations of Weil nor her choice of passages are misleading; she provides a stark, masterful description of Weil’s goal of learning to think and perceive from a place beyond self-interest. Nonetheless, both her selection of the passages in which Weil mentions God and her own interpretation of those passages lean in the direction of treating God as a kind of grammatical placeholder, a pure void.

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Cameron also makes searingly precise distinctions and asks compelling questions—for example, right after convincingly defending Weil against charges of masochism, she asks whether Weil’s death was inevitable—that is to say, whether thinking as Weil did was inherently lethal.

of the human historical, social, cultural, collective mind. But this, Allen and Springsted argue, is not actually a problem in Winch’s interpretation of Weil so much as a problem in the way philosophy and theology have been divided (84).

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Murdoch, Cameron, and Winch are all excellent readers of Weil from whom I have learned much. Their Platonic, Wittgensteinian, or grammatical approaches are in keeping with much of what Weil said—Weil is, after all, deeply committed to the Good, and often writes about it with much less ambivalence and caution than she writes about God. And there are many places where Weil seems either explicitly to parallel Wittgenstein, or to be thinking in ways that are clearly grammatical, which is to say that she is interested in language functionally: she is interested in the way we can fruitfully talk about what there is, a way that moves us toward contact with things as they are, much more than she is interested in claiming any one-to-one correspondence between her words and reality. Such readings of Weil, and the possibility of a secular discipline of attention, furthermore, are key to the kind of theology Weil sought to do. Weil saw herself as having a vocation to be “Christian outside the church,” which meant, precisely, to make the Christian church’s riches available universally. It is thus exactly right from a Weilian theological perspective that attention should be both describable and practicable from a secular position, or, indeed, from any position.

And yet, when Weil writes about her experience at Assisi, she says that “Christ himself came down and took possession of me.”65 She does not, here, seem to be using language in a way that matches the use of language Winch describes in the claim that

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two parallel lines “meet at infinity,” or in a way that fits Cameron’s analysis of Weil’s language as driving us into the faceless void of the unimaginable. Weil is not imagining at all; she is remembering. She is speaking in mystical language, which means that she is speaking with the knowledge that (even more than in ordinary speech) the words she uses are inadequate to the things she seeks to express, but not in a way that makes those things any less a part of (or even the ground of) what is there. The “void of God that is fuller than our plenitude” has taken possession of her. Likewise, when, at Solesmes, she writes that a young English Catholic returned from Eucharist clothed in “a truly angelic radiance,” she seems to mean quite literally what she says, and to be referring to actual, perceptible realities. If Murdoch, Winch, and Cameron are stringently accurate in their descriptions of Weil, they stop short. They do not follow Weil beyond Assisi and Solesmes. Attention is a method and a discipline for Weil, but it is more than either of those. She is unbending in her assertion that attention has its source in God, and that attention will lead us toward God. It is a grace. Pure attention is prayer; attention is (and has its roots in) love. Attention is our surrendering ourselves back to God, who gave us ourselves. Because attention is surrender to God, attention is ultimately not our action but God’s action. Or better put, attention is what happens in and through us at the point where it no longer makes sense to distinguish between our action and God’s.

There is no difficulty with taking Weil’s account of attention and using it to describe the discipline of attention from a purely secular perspective. But if one makes a beginning in actually practicing attention as Weil proposes it, one is (in Weil’s view) necessarily opening oneself to the possibility of an encounter with God. Just as it is key to Weil’s theology to describe attention in a way accessible to anyone, it is also key that a secular person who opens herself to the practice of attention is thereby opening herself to the possibility of ceasing to remain secular. And vice versa: a person of any faith who has arrived at an idea of God by way of a process not based in attention is, by opening herself to attention and therefore to reality, risking the loss of that idea. Because God is free, Weil reasons, no human is ever guaranteed direct experience of God; but she also thinks that the longer we practice attention, and the better we get at it, the more we encounter what there is; and the more likely it becomes that we encounter the Source of all there is, which is Plato’s Good; and is also the Christian Trinity.

Before her mystical experiences, Weil’s position on God was a strict, silent agnosticism: because humans lack evidence for any profitable discussion of God’s existence or nature, she thought it best that we refrain from such discussion.67 This preference for silence never wholly left her. It shows up explicitly in her claim that Christians are better off not thinking about heaven at all, because any idea of life after

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physical death has such potential to make us spiritually mercenary, by giving us the idea that the part of us that says “I” could live forever, in glory, with rewards. This, she thought, feeds our illusion of centrality, which is spiritually the worst thing we can do.⁶⁸

Even after her mystical experiences and deep engagement with Catholicism, she is much more comfortable writing about what God is not like and what God will not do, than about what God is like and will do. But behind and beyond her negations, she does present a view of God.

Weil understands God in terms of a perfect and perfectly satisfied love. Her notebooks include numerous discussions of the Trinity, including a three-page series of quotations from Aquinas, Boethius, Hilary, Augustine, as well as from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. The passages she selects are all Aquinas’ own quotes in the *Summa Theologica*, and largely explore the nature of the word “person” when used of the Trinity, or provide descriptions of relations between the three persons.⁶⁹ Her arrangement of passages builds toward a case for the idea of relation rather than of static essence as primary in the meaning of “person” when applied to God. She begins with a short

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⁶⁸ The same impulse may be at the root of her claim that it would be easier for her to believe without the Resurrection, that the beauty of the accounts of the Passion, and the fact of the Crucifixion, are to her the proofs that matter (*Lettre à un religieux*, 62, English in *Letter to a Priest*, 55).

⁶⁹ One Augustine passage, for example, begins with the claim that unity is in the Father, equality is in the Son, and that in the Spirit, equality and unity concur; the Hilary passage claims that eternity is in the Father, beauty in the Image (Son), and *jouissance* (pleasure, fulfillment) in the Gift (Spirit) (*OC* 6.3, 357 (Cahier XI, 58), both Augustine and Hilary as cited in the *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 39, Art. 8).
numerical reflection: “1-2-3-4. One God—Two processions—Three persons—Four relations.” Considering that this is the woman who wrote the letter later published as Letter to a Priest, which, in print, totals to around 80 pages and is made up of questions and challenges to Catholicism (including the claims that the Church’s use of anathema sit is totalitarian and that Thomas’ conception of faith may be more totalitarian than Hitler’s politics, and the demand that the church excise large parts of the Old Testament from its canon), her reflections on the Trinity are startlingly orthodox: one God, three persons, and a set of canonical quotations accepted at face value. The Trinity seems to have made instant, intuitive sense to Weil.

For Weil, the Trinity’s self-sufficient love expresses itself toward creation in stark, radical generosity. This is true already in the very act of creation, which Weil sometimes calls “decreation,” because she understands creation as God’s act of stepping back in order to give creatures space to be fully themselves, rather than pantheist extensions of God. She interprets John’s claim that “The Lamb was slain from before the foundations of the world” as referring to creation, and as a statement about the nature of God’s relation to space and time. Because of God’s stepping back to accommodate creatures’ finiteness, she writes that creation itself (even before sin) involved God’s

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70 OC 6.3, p. 356 (Cahier 11, p. 58).
71 Weil’s concerns about the Old Testament are detailed throughout the Letter to a Priest. The claim about Thomas and Hitler is on p. 44 in French (p. 39 in English), and discussions of anathema sit are also found throughout the letter, for example on p. 68-70 in French (p. 62-3 in English).
crucifixion on space and time.\textsuperscript{72} Weil is not interested in speculating about why God made the world, but she insists that God had nothing to gain, that (if arithmetic is helpful for thinking about such questions) the world plus God would always be less than God alone. When she writes that that God alone is greater than God and creation together, what she means is not that creation is not good, but that anything made and finite is less perfect, less fully realized, less brimming with glory than the Trinity is, and that God’s creating therefore involved sacrifice from the very beginning.\textsuperscript{73} But Weil

\textsuperscript{72} This is Eric Springsted’s striking paraphrase of Weil (Simone Weil & the Suffering of Love, 49). She expresses the idea in passages like the following: “God created through love and for love. God did not create anything except love itself, and the means to love. He created love in all its forms. He created beings capable of love from all possible distances. Because no other could do it, he himself went to the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion. Nothing can be further from God than that which has been made accursed.

This tearing apart, over which supreme love places the bond of supreme union, echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of the silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like a pure and heart-rending harmony. This is the Word of God. The whole creation is nothing but its vibration. When human music in its greatest purity pierces our soul, this is what we hear through it. When we have learned to hear the silence, this is what we grasp more distinctly through it” (OC IV.2, 351; English in “The Love of God and Affliction,” Waiting for God, 72).

\textsuperscript{73} Weil has been criticized for failing to provide a viable theology of the goodness of creation (see for example Rowan Williams, “Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-Existence of God,” Wrestling with Angels, 203-227). The basic formula of decreation, its subtractive logic, seems to imply that creation somehow cancels out a piece of the presence of God, as though they cannot coexist, as does the notebook passage in which Weil asks for the beating of her own heart to be removed because it disturbs the communion between God and creation (OC 6.3, 109, English in The Notebooks of Simone Weil, trans. Arthur Wills, 422). But Weil’s own description of the action of grace, and of God’s presence in all suffering because of Christ, contradicts this subtractive logic. Jeremy Begbie’s helpful image from music, regarding simultaneous non-competitive, non-subtractive presence, is that while two colors of paint cannot coexist in the same space without one blocking the other out, or both mixing to form a new color, two (or more) notes of music can absolutely coexist in the same place, while remaining fully themselves and forming a harmony
concludes that arithmetic is not helpful here: the addition problem requires us to think of God in terms of being, and we ought instead to think of God in terms of love: “Why did God create? It seems so evident that God is greater than God and creation together. At least that seems evident if one thinks of God as being. But one must not think this way. As soon as one thinks of God as love, one feels the marvel of the love that unites

(see chapter 6 of Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God*). Weil’s idea of grace, and of Christ’s incarnation “echoing” in other religions and even in nonreligious contexts, is fully compatible with this musical metaphor. We may read Weil on this point not so much as proposing a firm subtractive view of personhood, or presence, or of creation and God, but rather as having failed to guard against a possible implication of her theory. Unless one is reading her as a systematic theologian who needs to provide a standalone theology for the church, this is not a serious problem—and, given that most of what we have of hers was not finished for publication, and that she only lived to be 34, it is hardly a serious criticism.

While it is true that she does not provide a robust theology of the goodness of creation, it is also easy to overstate her failure and to misunderstand its significance. The issue is less that she does not think creation is good, than that she is primarily interested in other questions. Weil’s theology of creation is problematic for orthodox theology in the same way that her hesitation to talk about eschatology (or her claim, in the *Letter to a Priest*, that Christianity would be easier for her to believe if there were no account of resurrection) is problematic. That is, she is problematic insofar as eschatology and resurrection are key parts of Christian theology. Deleting these parts of Christian theology would completely change its claims about how things are. But I do not understand Weil as having any interest in deleting the goodness of creation from Christian theology, any more than she seeks to delete the resurrection or the eschaton. Her failure to emphasize these aspects of theology derive not from a negative desire regarding these questions (a desire to deny these parts of theology and delete them from Christianity) but from a positive desire regarding other questions (such as, for example, the question of suffering). The best way of describing her failure to provide a robust theology of the goodness of creation, I think, is to say that Weil is enormously useful in thinking about some parts of Christian theology (for example, the theology of suffering and of God’s goodness within suffering), and less useful in thinking about other parts (for example, resurrection, or the goodness of creation). Scholars like Emmanuel Gabellieri make a case that Weil is useful even in thinking about the goodness of creation, but such usefulness is, to me, indirect.
the Son and the Father in the eternal unity of the one God across the separation of space, time and the Cross.”

Weil ends her Trinitarian reflections by quoting Thomas: “The use in which the Father and the Son enjoy each other is similar to that which is the property of the Holy Spirit.” After a blank line, she writes “The Spirit is attention.” In Weil’s view, attention opens us toward a God who is hidden, who cannot be actively sought and found but can only be waited for, and who finds us. God’s hiding grows out of love: out of concern for our freedom, God has turned the government of the world over to the inner workings of matter and chance. If God intervened in the workings of the world to reward human virtue and punish vice, she thinks, it would be in humans’ own self-interest to be good. Therefore, God hides behind necessity, so that we can choose to pursue goodness out of love for God rather than out of self-interest.

God is active in the world, but hiddenly so. Weil’s essay “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” is about right human responses to God’s hiddenness. On the one hand, the essay is about the practices that will help prepare humans to love God (she lists loving

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74 “Pourquoi Dieu a-t-il créé ? Il semble tellement évident que Dieu est plus grand que Dieu et la création ensemble. Du moins cela semble évident si l’on pense Dieu comme être. Mais on ne doit pas le penser ainsi. Dès qu’on pense Dieu comme amour on sent cette merveille de l’amour qui unit le Fils et le Père à la fois dans l’unité éternelle du Dieu unique et par-dessus la séparation de l’espace, du temps et de la Croix” (“L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” OC 4.1, 368-69).

75 “L’usage dans lequel le Père et le Fils jouissent l’un l’autre, s’apparente à ce qui est la propriété de l’Esprit saint” (OC 6.3, 358 (cahier 11, p. 59); Summa Theologica, Part Ia, Question 29, Art. 4. Weil quotes in Latin. My translation is from the French used in the OC, which is listed as being “by P. H. F. Dondaine, modified by Simone Pètremont”).

76 Ibid.
the beauty or order of the world, loving our neighbor, and loving religious practices).

Understood from this angle, the love in the title is “implicit” because we are, in loving the beauty and order of the world, or our neighbor, not loving God directly (or explicitly) but loving God as God is hidden behind creation (or loving God implicitly).

But on the other hand, as Robert Chenavier points out, the implicit love in question is not actually human love at all, but God’s love. All love is God’s love. Seen from this angle, the love is implicit because God is at work in us secretly. This is what Weil means in saying that the Spirit is attention: attention quite literally is the work of God within us.

2.4 Käthe Kollwitz and Weilian Attention

To show why I think Käthe Kollwitz is doing something in her work that is very much like Weilian attention, I would like to consider Kollwitz’s sculpture Mother with Dead Son (Mutter mit totem Sohn, fig. 5). The sculpture’s title does not explicitly place it in the pietà tradition, but that tradition is so strong in Western art, and Kollwitz’s sculpture is so visually compatible with it, that it is often referred to as pietà in spite of her title; indeed she herself refers to it in this way.\(^77\) Because of the strength of this connection, it is instructive to consider Kollwitz’s small bronze alongside Michelangelo’s early marble Pietà (fig. 4), which is an iconic instance of the pietà tradition. At first glance, what stands out is the forceful resemblance in theme: a mother holding the dead body of an adult

\(^77\) Die Tagebücher, 10. April 1937, p. 690.
son. From there, one gradually feels a stronger and stronger distance between the two sculptures, until the differences begin to feel too numerous to count. The two sculptures differ in the mother’s age, facial expression, and clothing; in the son’s relative size and position; in the figures’ posture, silhouettes, overall composition, and emotional tone; and in the way they are directing our attention as viewers.

The sons seem relatively similar in age, but not so the mothers: where Michelangelo’s Mary (whom I will call “Mary” from here on) is a young woman, almost still a girl, with the smooth face one would expect in an annunciation rather than a pietà, Kollwitz’s mother is an old woman, her features softened and blunted by age, her forehead crumpled in grief. Mary has a smooth, delicate face, tilted to the side on a graceful neck, looking down in deep but quiet sadness. Her posture, though seated, is tall and open, with the right foot higher than the left, so that there is a sense of compositional movement. Though she is unadorned aside from her robes, those robes fold in and out in an incredible, crisp richness, beginning in the pile of curlicue folds in her headcloth, resting on the top of her head like a crown and cascading down her shoulders to meet the froth-like gathers her blouse makes across her breasts and down her shoulders and upper arms. Below her son’s body (dressed only in a loincloth but bearing minimal marks of the crucifixion), the folds of her robe thicken, conveying velvet or quilted silk or some rich, substantial fabric, and moving in a dazzling variety
and drama of folds to cover her entire lower body, the extra fabric dipping gracefully and elaborately between her knees, leaving openings reminiscent of an empty womb.

![Figure 4: Michelangelo Buonarroti, Pietà, 1498–1499, marble, St. Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City.](image)

Her son rests easily in her lap, her left knee supporting his thighs, her right knee his lower back, and her right hand cradling his upper back, the way one might hold an infant limp with sleep. Her ease in holding him is made possible by the fact that her son is much smaller than she is; were they both to stand up, she would tower over him, but
the heavy drapery she is wearing disguises the difference in their sizes so that it is not initially apparent. His head hangs back limply, leaving his throat and the whole front of his torso turned upward. Her free left hand is lifted and also turned palm upward, as though she is offering Jesus back to God, surrendering, in a gesture that gives the sculpture’s overall composition a sense of openness, almost of lifting off the ground. Its central lines move from her head, then down along her gaze to her son’s torso, up his body to his head, and down it to his feet, and from there, pulled along the swooping fabric folds, both upward and downward again, not in one single line but in hundreds of separate lines. The sculpture’s silhouette is like the fabric folds, lively and full of movement, and the many upward swoops in the fabric pull against the heavy downward lines of Mary’s lower legs, her son’s shins and feet, the slope of her shoulders, and his hanging head and arm. Coupled with his open torso and her offering palm, the fabric’s swirls and eddies (like a river rapid) create a sense of lightness, of richness and life in spite of the starkness of death.

From the back, Michelangelo’s sculpture shows Mary sitting on what looks like a rough-hewn bench, her back curved outward with holding the weight of her son, and her mantle swept around him to the right. Seen directly from the side, their collective silhouette is surprisingly narrow compared to the broad pyramid of the frontal view, emphasizing Mary’s slenderness, and leaving the whole composition looking precarious, as though not meant to stay this way forever. Michelangelo’s sculpture is
like a waterfall, narrow from the side and wide from the front, alive with countless flurries and eddies of movement. Kollwitz’s sculpture maintains its pyramidal composition from every direction, with a base that appears particularly wide seen from the side, giving it a massive, grounded appearance, like a weathered rock that has sat in its place for thousands of years and will continue for thousands more. Kollwitz’s composition is reminiscent of Weil’s recurring descriptions of ocean waves or of rock layers in the mountains, mutely obedient to the forces that act upon them.

Kollwitz’s mother (whom I will call “the mother” from here on) also has her head covered with a cloth or hood, and like Mary, the only skin showing is on her face and hands. But there the similarity in clothing ends: her headcloth is one simple layer, her robe plain and coarse-looking. Even where it folds, it looks worn, with none of the decorative richness of Mary’s robes. Her son is proportionally much more similar in size to her than Michelangelo’s Jesus is to Mary, and rather than lying across her legs, he is leaning back against her, his head against her chest, shoulders between her wide-apart knees, and his shins tucked up close to his torso. His right shoulder and his legs from the knees down are bare, and the rest of his body is hidden in folds of fabric that may be a part of the mother’s robe. As in Michelangelo’s marble, the folds in fabric direct our gaze. The mother’s agonized face is at the apex of the pyramidal composition. Her head is pulled down between her shoulders, creating fabric folds around her neck that lead us to her right arm, which is raised protectively over her son’s head and ends in a massive
hand, the palm cupped around her son’s forehead and covering the upper half of his face, the thumb pressed against her own mouth and covering the lower half of her face. They share one whole visible face between the two of them; everything else is hidden by

Figure 5: Kollwitz, *Mother with Dead Son (Mutter mit totem Sohn)*, 1937-39, bronze, Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Köln.

her hand. The folds in her robe frame the lines of his tipped-back face and his throat (bare and vulnerable like the throat of Michelangelo’s Jesus), and lead us down in a halting zigzag to his visible right shoulder leaning against her inner thigh, then his left
hand, curled at the base of his neck, and then along his limp right fingers, their tips cradled with almost unbearable tenderness in the mother’s upturned left palm. Her hand is framed by the folds of her sleeve in concentric curves, one cupped around the other, moving out like rings in still water after a stone is dropped in, and framing the contact between their two hands in a compositional eddy that feels endless.

In front of their quiet hands, his shins are angled downwards in a harsh slash (though, again as with Michelangelo’s Jesus, what is visible of his body appears intact), ending in his limp feet, one resting on the sculpture’s base, the other hanging off it. The composition’s first key line as seen from the front is a circle (with the mother’s forearms framing his face and chest in the center of the circle, and her face sitting at the top of the circle). The second main compositional line in the front view is a heavy downward zigzag, ending in the feet, which point aimlessly in two different directions, so that the line of our gaze would need to cross in order to follow them. As viewers, our gaze is simultaneously caught in the circles and zigzags of the composition’s lines, halted in the places of physical contact and drawn heavily downward, left at the end with nowhere to go.

Michelangelo’s Mary’s eyes are lowered, looking at her son, but they are not closed, and in fact the line of her gaze is part of the compositional movement. Kollwitz’s mother has her eyes pressed shut, but even so the gaze is a kind of compositional line: it simultaneously shuts us out and turns us inward with her, and it focuses us on the
tactile sensations of her contact with her son’s body. She is not looking at him, at least not physically; she is feeling him. Looking at her, we can feel the hardness of the front of his skull against her right palm, and the feather weight of his fingertips in her left palm. Overall, Michelangelo conveys a woman in solemn, holy sorrow, who is offering herself and her son back up to God in a scene that hints already (in the largely intact state of Christ’s body and by the splendor and even playfulness of Mary’s drapery) that death will not have the final word; whereas Kollwitz conveys a woman so absorbed in the enormity of her grief that she is (for the time being) wholly lost to the world outside that grief. Her entire body curves inward, around her son.

Works of art are centrally about directing viewers’ attention, and Michelangelo and Kollwitz’s sculptures direct our attention in two different ways. Michelangelo’s sculpture is a multi-layered presentation: the sculpture presents to us Mary, who presents to us her dead son, the savior of the world. Mary holds Jesus open on her lap, and opens her hand out next to him, palm up, as though to say “behold.” In her gestures, even the line of her gaze, Mary is communicating with viewers, telling them what to look at, telling them what matters.

Michelangelo takes Mary’s grief seriously. While viewers may know that the resurrection is coming, Mary herself is holding her son, who was murdered, and is dead. And yet grief is not the central reality to which Michelangelo’s sculpture directs our attention. For one thing, his Pietà is not contained in chronological time. The sculpture
presents Mary between the crucifixion and resurrection. But Mary’s face and body are those of a young woman, not a woman with a 33-year-old son. It is the face of Mary as she might have looked at the annunciation, at the moment when she said to the angel “I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). And at the same time it presents Mary dressed as the Queen of Heaven, the woman venerated by the church precisely for the absolute consent to God that is evident both in the annunciation and in the Pietà. Considered in terms of consent, Michelangelo’s Pietà is in harmony with Weil’s theology of attention. Attention, for Weil, is the way of consenting to things as they are, which is also the way of living lives that are open toward God. Tonally, however, Michelangelo’s Pietà finds little resonance in Weil’s writing. God is not hidden enough in this sculpture; grief makes too much sense.

Kollwitz’s sculpture resonates far more fully with Weil’s writing, especially Weil’s sense that we live in a world characterized by suffering, in which God is almost completely hidden from us. In the school studies essay, Weil claimed that the ability to attend to suffering was, on a human level, the whole point of learning attention. Kollwitz’s sculpture fits Weil’s account because it confronts us with the mother’s grief in a way that can help us learn to attend to grief and suffering in ourselves and others.

If Mary actively presents Jesus, Kollwitz’s mother is in a world set apart, a world of her own grief. Nothing about her posture and gestures is directed toward an audience. She presents nothing. She is wrapped around the body of her son, as though
pulling him back into herself, so much so that the whole sculpture’s silhouette is contained from every direction in the silhouette of her seated, pyramidal body. Much more than Michelangelo, Kollwitz presents to us the stark, raw fact of grief and loss. Instead of stepping outside of chronological time by referring complexly to multiple moments in time, Kollwitz’s sculpture annihilates chronological time. The mother is in the mute no-where and no-time of the death of her son. Unlike Mary’s gesturing left hand, the mother’s left hand cups her son’s fingertips, and seems frozen in that touch, as though that hand has become useless for any other purpose.

Both women are responding to an event they did not foresee or desire, and in this the figures themselves are shown in a position from which they could respond with the kind of open receptiveness that is the beginning of Weilian attention. If we guess at the figures’ attitudes from the visual cues the sculptures give us, then it is Mary who seems more likely to be attentive in a Weilian sense: she is calmly open, not fighting the fact of her son’s death, and she seems, based on the equanimity of her expression even in its sorrow, to be trusting in God’s goodness in spite of and beyond her grief. But this Mary knows too much to be an entry point into Weilian attention to suffering. Michelangelo’s sculpture does not convey primarily the heaviness of Mary’s grief, but points beyond that grief into the restoration of all things that is foreshadowed in Christ’s resurrection. It pulls the joyous future into the heartbroken present: the joy of life is there in the mute, dancing drapery even while Mary holds her crucified son in her arms.
In this, Mary is like Weil’s description of martyrs, whose suffering can never be affliction no matter how great their pain, because they suffer and die in hope and with purpose. The rare suffering graced by the miracle of such hope is not Weil’s primary concern (though this, it seems, is the kind of suffering she hopes for for her friend Father Perrin in the tender letter passage quoted earlier). Usually, Weil interested in suffering that blots out all possibility of a future, suffering that is total and consuming. Even suffering that is not a personhood-destroying affliction tends to have this consuming quality in ordinary experience, to expand to fill all the available space, to suck up all the air needed for the breath that would let us hope. This is the kind of suffering Kollwitz’s sculpture conveys, and it is for this reason that Mother with Dead Son (fig. 5) provides an entry point for viewers into precisely what Weil means by attention to suffering.

Kollwitz’s sculpture annihilates chronological time through a powerful tension: on the one hand, the heavy base and blocky pyramid of the sculpture implies permanence, even timelessness; on the other hand, the pose itself is so momentary, such a short stop in the long journey of the rest of the mother’s life. In the sculpture as in life, suffering makes the present moment seem to expand to fill all time. Both Kollwitz and

78 “Le malheur n’aurait pas cette vertu sans la part de hasard qu’il enferme. Ceux qui sont persécutés pour leur foi et qui le savent, quoi qu’ils aient à souffrir, ne sont pas des malheureux. Ils tombent dans le malheur seulement si la souffrance ou la peur occupent l’âme au point de faire oublier la cause de la persécution. Les martyrs livrés aux bêtes qui entraient dans l’arène en chantant n’étaient pas des malheureux. Le Christ était un malheureux. Il n’est pas mort comme un martyr. Il est mort comme un criminel de droit commun, mélangé aux larrons, seulement un peu plus ridicule. Car le malheur est ridicule” (“L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” OC 4.1, 352).
Weil convey this geological quality of human suffering, the way it puts us into multiple incompatible relationships with time at once: it freezes us in time, in our sense that this moment will never end; it makes us acutely aware that time has passed and will pass, by confronting us with what we have lost and are losing; and it knocks us out of time by making us feel that the passage of time can change nothing for us even as it has changed everything, because it cannot give us back what is gone. It is almost as though suffering is never really ours, as though it consumes us and yet also outlasts us, like rock formations do. This is partly what makes suffering so difficult. In suffering, we sense we are holding in our bodies something that does not fit inside the fragility and limitation of what we are. And it is hostile to us, or at least it is indifferent to its catastrophic effect on us. It holds us in its indifference, and we feel ourselves at once permanent as rocks in our suffering, and fragile as grass in our ability to bear it.

The felt reality of suffering is key for Weil. She assents to the theology implied by Michelangelo’s Pietà—the coming resurrection, the restoration of all things, the image of God in us. She is fiercely committed to trusting the goodness of God even in suffering. But she does not think that for most of us, most of the time, hopeful feelings about future redemption are part of the experience of suffering. And so she seeks a way of relating to suffering that takes it for what it is, that remembers that it does not feel hopeful. Weil writes that the Iliad’s greatness as a poem lies in its recognition that
precious things are precious, even when they are destroyed.\textsuperscript{79} Both Kollwitz and Weil
begin at the same point in considering suffering: in an acceptance of suffering in all its
crushing bleakness, and in a ferocious, intractable insistence on the preciousness of all
that we lose, and on our common value as human beings even when we lose all sense of
our own value.

Though she called her sculpture Mother with Dead Son (fig. 5), Kollwitz refers to it
as a pietà in her diaries and compares it to a Catholic friend’s pietà, unfavorably, because
hers (Kollwitz’s) is mired in sorrow, whereas the Catholic friend’s is looking beyond her
sorrow into a spiritual hope.\textsuperscript{80} In the context of her own life, it makes sense for Kollwitz

\textsuperscript{79} “Rien de précieux, destiné ou non à péri, n’est méprisé ; la misère de tous est exposée sans
dissimulation ni dédain ; aucun homme n’est placé au-dessus de la condition commune à tous les
hommes ; tout ce qui est détruit est regretté. Vainceurs et vaincus sont également proches, sont
au même titre les semblables du poète et de l’auditeur” (“L’Iliade ou le poème de la force,” OC
6.3, 109). (“Nothing precious is scorned, whether or not death is its destiny; everyone’s
unhappiness is laid bare without dissimulation or disdain; no man is set above or below the
condition common to all men; whatever is destroyed is regretted. Victors and vanquished are
brought equally near us; under the same head, both are seen as counterparts of the poet, and the
listener as well,” “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” Pendle Hill, tr. Mary McCarthy, 30).

\textsuperscript{80} “Im Februar dieses Jahres—ungefähr zur gleichen Zeit als Karl so schwer erkrankt war—
erkrankte Frieda Winckelmann von neuem an ihrer überwunden geglaubten Krebskrankheit. Sie
hat durch ihren starken Willen, durch die Beschwingungen, die sie durch den katholischen
Glauben erfuhr, die tragende Mithilfe ihrer Freunde, vor allem des Pfarrer Krajewski, es möglich
gemacht ihre besten Arbeiten in dieser Zeit zu leisten. Als ich am 20. September dort in ihrem
Atelier war sah ich ihre Pietà.

Verwandt mit meiner nur darin, wie die Mutter die tote Hand des Sohnes hält. Aber
meine ist nicht religiös. Frieda Winckelmanns dagegen ist religiös, katholisch religiös. Sie hat
mehr (698) Größe und Gewicht dadurch. Der Kopf der Maria ist nicht leer, wie Hans ihn nannte,
er ist nur heraufgehoben in die Heilandsmutter. Meine Mutter bleibt im Sinne darüber, daß der
Sohn nicht angenommen wurde von den Menschen. Sie ist eine alte einsame und dunkel
nachsinnende Frau, der Winckelmann Mutter ist daneben noch Himmelskönigin. Im Sohn ist ihre

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to see it as a failure to be mired in sorrow. In doing the work of grieving her own son’s
death, she is looking for a way forward, a way back into life, a way to live beyond
sorrow and a life that is more than suffering. But in the conversation I am trying to stage
between her work and Weil’s philosophy, Kollwitz’s work in *Mother with Dead Son* (fig.
5) is important exactly as it is. In the process of learning attention, and especially
learning to attend to suffering, Weil emphasizes the importance of holding still and
letting what is before us be simply what it is. Attention will become action, and will
become more than holding still; but it begins, for Weil, with holding still.

Arbeit und die meine ähnlicher, aber ihre ist im Sohn besser. Auch Frieda Winckelmann war
sicher derselben Ansicht, trotzdem sie nichts sagte.

Diese ihre Arbeit ist groß und gut. Sie ist ihre beste. Dann hat sie nur noch eine Heilige
begonnen und nicht mehr vollenden können. Am 20. November gab sie den Kampf auf und legte
sich ins Hedwigs-Krankenhaus, um nicht mehr aufzustehn. Sie hat es gut dort gehabt in den 3
Wochen. Sie war unter Glaubensgenossen, die liebevoll zu ihr waren. Am 12. war ich noch bei
ihr. Sie war sehr matt aber voller Teilnahme. Am 13. läutete Lise mich an. Sie war zu ihr
gekommen, als der Geistliche mit ihr oder vor ihr betete. Sie war teils bewußtlos. Einmal hätte es
geschehen, als ob sie die Lise erkannte. Dann die Augen wieder geschlossen. Heut sagte mir früh
die Oberschwester, daß sie eingeschlafen sei. Sie sagte, sie hätte vielleicht nie so einen sanften
Tod gesehen, wie sie ihn gehabt hat” (Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, [December 1939], 697-98).
3. Attention to Suffering: Difficulty, Hesitation, Exposure, and Tragedy

The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea’s beauty.

All the horrors produced in this world are like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty. Sometimes a poem, such as the *Iliad*, brings this beauty to light.

Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction”¹

While I drew, and the children’s terror made me weep with them, I really felt the weight of the burden I am bearing. I felt that I could not after all withdraw from the task of being an advocate. I am to speak out the suffering of people, that never ends, that is now as big as mountains.

Käthe Kollwitz, diaries²

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¹ “La mer n’est pas moins belle à nos yeux parce que nous savons que parfois des bateaux sombrent. Elle en est plus belle au contraire. Si elle modifiait le mouvement de ses vagues pour épargner un bateau, elle serait un être doué de discernement et de choix, et non pas ce fluide parfaitement obéissant à toutes les pressions extérieures. C’est cette parfaite obéissance qui est sa beauté.


3.1 Seeing Suffering

Kollwitz wrote in her diary that she wanted to draw a person who sees the suffering of the world. “Can that be anyone other than Jesus?” she asks, almost as an aside, then continues, “In the drawing, too, where death is snatching the children, there is a woman in the back who sees the world’s suffering. It is not her children who are being snatched; she is much older. And she is not watching, she does not move a limb, but she knows about the world’s suffering.” Kollwitz does not clarify what she means by the aside about Jesus, or whether the older woman in the drawing who sees and knows the world’s suffering is, in some way, an embodiment of Jesus. Neither does she clarify why it is that she values the seeing, or the knowledge, of suffering. Three things, however, are clear. First is that she does value the knowledge of suffering and the ability to see it (she thinks actively about wanting to depict someone who has this ability). Second is that she values such knowledge as something explicitly separate from action (the woman does not move a limb). Third is that she does not think such knowledge is something human beings necessarily have (in fact, she thinks one might need to be Jesus in order to have it).

3 “Ich will eine Zeichnung machen, die einen Menschen zeigt, der das Leid der Welt sieht. Kann das nicht nur Jesus sein? — Auch auf der Zeichnung, wo der Tod die Kinder packt, sitzt hinten eine Frau, die das Leid der Welt sieht. Es sind nicht ihre Kinder, die der Tod packt, sie ist viel älter. Sie sieht auch nicht zu, sie rührt kein Glied, aber sie weiß um das Leid der Welt” (Kollwitz, Die Tagebcher, 26. Februar 1920, 456, emphasis Kollwitz’s).
In her essay on school studies, Weil writes that while the overarching purpose of attention is prayer, its greatest human purpose is the ability to attend to someone who is in a state of affliction. Neither Kollwitz nor Weil would dream of proposing that we ought in general to sit perceiving the world’s suffering without taking any action. And yet they both seem to see value in the seeing of human suffering, even when that seeing has no apparent or immediate connection to action.

The seeing in in Kollwitz’s diary entry is not even of a particular suffering (on which one could possibly take direct action) but rather a knowledge of the fact of suffering, its existence in general (on which one cannot directly take action at all). If action is important to Weil and Kollwitz (as it obviously is), and if attention and action are inseparable (as they are for Weil), then why spend time and energy focusing specifically on paying attention to suffering, on just knowing it is there?

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which is a book about the ethics of seeing other people’s suffering by way of visual media from photography to painting, Susan Sontag agrees with Weil that attention and action should not be separated. She writes that it is not inundation with images of suffering that causes apathy, but our failure or inability to take action in response to those images: “Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. [...] It is passivity that dulls feeling.” And yet Sontag also thinks that knowing about suffering is in itself important. She writes that

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regarding the pain of distant others is not only a fact of modern life, but a human obligation. We must know (and see) that this happens and how it comes about, not even so much in each particular instance as in general—just as the woman in the background of Kollwitz’s drawing is not particularly watching the children who are being seized by death, but is someone who knows about human suffering.

Sontag gives a strong and negative reason why we ought to know about suffering, with a particular slant toward suffering inflicted on humans by other humans: “Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.”\(^5\) We need to know that depravity exists not because such knowledge is a moral achievement, but as a matter of course, as part of growing up: “No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia.”\(^6\) For Sontag, an awareness of depravity specifically, and horrific suffering more generally, is something human adults are able to have, and should have. The failure to know about the world’s suffering marks a person as immature, naïve, even infantile. Sontag has even less understanding for those who describe second-hand accounts of suffering as purely mediated, as

\(^5\) Ibid., 114.
\(^6\) Ibid.
basically spectacle. Such claims are, she writes, morally shallow, and can be made only by those who are safe, educated, and far away from the suffering in question. “To speak of reality becoming a spectacle,” she concludes, “is a breathtaking provincialism.”

Weil and Kollwitz would almost certainly share Sontag’s scathing assessment of the claim that depictions of suffering are mere spectacle. I suspect they would also agree with Sontag that knowing about depravity (or about suffering more largely) is a requirement for adulthood. And yet they pause, for much longer than Sontag does, on the difficulty of achieving such knowledge, of doing such seeing. Kollwitz and Weil both write about the knowledge of the world’s suffering as though it is not a given at all: Weil writes that attention to affliction is a miracle; Kollwitz writes that a person who sees the world’s suffering would have to be Jesus. Both Kollwitz and Weil (explicitly or implicitly) assert that such knowledge and sight is impossible for human beings without God’s help. “Seeing the world’s suffering” is a standalone value to both Weil and Kollwitz partly because it is so difficult.

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7 Ibid., 110.
8 “Ceux à qui il est arrivé un de ces coups après lesquels un être se débat sur le sol comme un ver à moitié écrasé, ceux-là n’ont pas de mots pour exprimer ce qui leur arrive. Parmi les gens qu’ils rencontrent, ceux qui, même ayant beaucoup souffert, n’ont jamais eu contact avec le malheur proprement dit n’ont aucune idée de ce que c’est. C’est quelque chose de spécifique, irréductible à toute autre chose, comme les sons, dont rien ne peut donner aucune idée à un sourd-muet. Et ceux qui ont été eux-mêmes mutilés par le malheur sont hors d’état de porter secours à qui que ce soit et presque incapables même de le désirer. Ainsi la compassion à l’égard des malheureux est une impossibilité. Quand elle se produit vraiment, c’est un miracle plus surprenant que la marche sur les eaux, la guérison des malades et même la résurrection d’un mort” (“L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” OC 4.1, 349).
But seeing suffering is important to Weil and Kollwitz not only because it is difficult. Kollwitz articulates the importance, to her, of bearing witness to suffering, but she does not articulate her reasons for valuing witness. Weil, by contrast, does articulate reasons. Seeing suffering, she thinks, is important because of the nature of the worst kinds of suffering. I have mentioned already that Weil thinks there are two kinds of suffering: ordinary suffering (which can include any level of emotional, physical, or spiritual pain, so long as it leaves the sufferer with some sense of his own humanity), and affliction (which is a categorically different intensity of suffering that involves the destruction of our own sense of personhood and humanity). Weil thinks that afflicted people are invisible to us precisely because seeing another person’s suffering involves reciprocity: suffering so deep that it destroys our very sense of selfhood and of common humanity is (humanly speaking) impossible to attend to because attending to it means recognizing the possibility that we ourselves could suffer in just this way, that everything I recognize in myself as “I” could be destroyed by affliction. It is affliction’s

9 “La pensée humaine ne peut pas reconnaître la réalité du malheur. Si quelqu’un reconnaît la réalité du malheur, il doit se dire : « Un jeu de circonstances que je ne contrôle pas peut m’enlever n’importe quoi, à n’importe quel instant, y compris toutes ces choses qui sont tellement à moi que je les considère comme étant moi-même. Il n’y a rien en moi que je ne puisse perdre. Un hasard peut n’importe quand abolir ce que je suis et mettre à la place n’importe quoi de vil et de méprisable »” (“La personne et le sacré,” *Ecrits de Londres*, 35). “Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction. To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: ‘I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at
randomness, Weil writes, that keeps us from seeing the afflicted.\footnote{Randomness and inexplicability are key to Weil’s account of what affliction is. Martyrdom is not affliction precisely because there is a \textit{reason} for the suffering ("L’amour de Dieu et le malheur," \textit{OC} 4.1, 352).} Because affliction is in fact random, nothing inherently protects us from it, nothing makes us exempt. But this is a truth so terrifying that we flee from it into falsehoods: this afflicted person is at fault somehow. She brought this on herself. Or maybe she is simply the kind of person to whom this sort of thing happens. But I am not.

This invisibility extends even to the afflicted themselves: when we are afflicted we judge that we are either at fault, or are somehow defective, to have brought such destruction upon ourselves. In a cruel twist, it is partly the invisibility that accompanies affliction that makes it so powerfully destructive. Weil has three criteria for suffering that constitutes affliction: first, the pain involved must have some kind of physical element, which can include the physical sensations associated with deep emotional suffering (the sense of having the wind knocked out of us by terrible news, for example). Second, affliction involves the soul’s pitiful dependence upon capriciously fragile things (an overwhelming sense that my value as a person or my ability to go on living depend upon the affections of a moody friend or lover, or on being able to get eggs or sugar in wartime). Thirdly, affliction involves a sense of social ostracism, of being invisible, of
which the flip side is an internal agreement, our own sense that we cannot be valuable human beings if something like this has happened to us.

When Weil insists on the importance of attention to suffering, she is not only arguing, pragmatically, that we cannot fix a problem we do not understand. She does think this, and in her study of the oppressiveness of factory work, it is this argument that leads her to conclude she must spend a year working in automobile factories. She argues that none of the theorists of the proletariat have spent time on the ground in factories, which means that their solutions are top-down. Solutions that do not take the workers’ actual experience and the lived reality of factory work into account are at best stabs in the dark, and at worst they are fantastical, practically impossible solutions to imaginary problems, which leave unseen and untouched the oppression of the human beings working in factories, on whose behalf the solutions were supposedly developed.¹¹ But when she writes about attention to affliction, Weil has in mind more than a necessary step in the process of solving the problems that lead to oppression. Seeing suffering is so important to Weil because invisibility is one of the constitutive elements of affliction. This means that if we can see affliction, we are not only building a good

¹¹ Joël Janiaud traces out Weil’s reasons for going to work in automobile factories as part of a development of her account of “action efficace” (“effective action” or “action that is worth calling action”). Such action would have to be the basis of revolution (ineffective action would get nowhere), and Weil reasons that if effective action cannot be revolt without thought, neither can it be thought imposed from above upon workers (Janiaud, Simone Weil: l’attention et l’action 35). One must actually know the world of factory workers from inside, and conceive of change from inside that world if the revolution is to be “efficace.”
foundation for alleviating it; we are already removing one of its key elements:
invisibility is one of the most crushing aspects of affliction. Kollwitz does not articulate a
Weilian view of suffering, or even talk about distinctions between kinds of suffering, but
her work resonates with a Weilian view of affliction in its insistence on conveying
suffering, and in her stated desire to depict a person who simply sees the world’s
suffering.

3.2 Suffering, Necessity, and Calling

The passages from Weil and Kollwitz that I used for my epigraphs both refer to
human suffering, but they consider that suffering in such different contexts that going
back and forth between them requires a massive shift in conceptual framework. This is
all the more disorienting because they are both using natural imagery. In fact, though
Weil uses the ocean as her image here, she makes a similar point (one paragraph before
the one I quoted) by referring to rock layers, whose wavelike obedience to gravity is just
like that of the sea, only slower. And while both the Weil and Kollwitz passages are
interested in suffering, their central topics are not the same. Weil’s central topic is the
beauty of the world, and in particular the relationship between human suffering and
beauty; Kollwitz’s central topic is her own role as a witness to suffering. The passages
are worth looking at closely for two reasons. First, they are each expressions of an idea
that is key to the whole life and work of its writer; and second, they crystallize the ways
in which I think Weil’s thought and Kollwitz’s work are complementary and compatible.

The idea hovering just behind Weil’s paragraphs is that of necessity. Necessity, for Weil, is what orders the world. God preserves human freedom by giving over the direct control of the world’s processes to necessity. This means that necessity is both what hides God from us, and what gives us access to God, which is why Weil lists the love of necessity as one of the forms of the implicit love of God. Necessity, beauty, and order are all part of the same thing for Weil; she compares necessity to the two faces of a coin. The face turned toward us looks like domination, which is crushing, and the face turned toward God looks like obedience, which is beautiful. It is easy for us to perceive the beauty of the order (or necessity) of the world when that order seems friendly toward us. It is very difficult to perceive the beauty in the order of the world when it seems hostile toward us. But it is key to Weil’s thought that the order of the world is not, in fact, either friendly or hostile toward us. It simply is. “It is one and the same thing that, relative to God, is eternal Wisdom; relative to the universe, perfect obedience;”

12 “Il faut aimer tendrement la dureté de cette nécessité qui est comme une médaille à double face, la face tournée vers nous étant domination, la face tournée vers Dieu étant obéissance” (“L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” OC 4.1, 362).
relative to our love, beauty; relative to our intelligence, equilibrium between necessary relations; relative to our flesh, brute force.”

In recognizing that the order of the world exists and moves without reference to us, Weil thinks we take a step toward recognizing God’s presence behind that order. The pressure of the world upon us (whether that pressure furthers or hinders our projects, or causes us pleasure or pain) is the pressure of that which gives us access to God. This is why it is beautiful. The sea’s perfect obedience to necessity, its perfect consistency in responding to gravity and wind, is beautiful. If we can learn to recognize this beauty even when the sea takes human lives, we are taking a step toward recognizing at a new and deeper level that the world does not exist for us, that we are not at its center. Weil’s view of the cosmos here radically decenters human beings and attempts to imagine a God’s-eye view, a view from beyond any particular or even collective human perspective. “But if we transport our heart out of ourselves,” she writes, “out of the universe, out of space and time, to where our Father is, and if from there we regard this mechanism, it appears completely different. What looked like necessity becomes obedience.”

13 “C’est une seule et même chose qui relativement à Dieu est Sagesse éternelle, relativement à l’univers parfaite obéissance, relativement à notre amour beauté, relativement à notre intelligence équilibre de relations nécessaires, relativement à notre chair force brutale” (OC, 5.2, 358).
14 “Mais si nous transportons notre cœur hors de nous-mêmes, hors de l’univers, hors de l’espace et du temps, là où est notre Père, et si de là nous regardons ce mécanisme, il apparaît tout autre. Ce qui semblait nécessité devient obéissance” (“L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” (OC 4.1, 354; English in Waiting for God, 76)).
On the topic of necessity (as on many other topics), Weil strives for impersonality. I noted previously that Sharon Cameron puts it well when she points out that Weil’s discipline of attention (of which this meditation on necessity is a part) is a way of learning to take as our goal in life something other than our own comfort. Weil thinks that if we can practice seeing from perspectives other than our own, just the growing conviction that such other perspectives exist will immeasurably enrich our understanding of the world. What looks like brute force can become the grace of obedience. The mute folds of rock layers become eloquent in their slow, perfect obedience to gravity, which (seen from a perspective outside the universe) is direct obedience to God.

Contrast to Weil’s passionate commitment to impersonality, the passionately personal cry of Kollwitz’s diary entry. In her notebooks, Weil explicitly strives to avoid the pronoun “I” in order to cultivate impersonality, and Sharon Cameron points out that even when Weil does use “I,” the pronoun is less a representation of a richly specific human subjectivity, and more a grammatical placeholder, a necessary part of the sentence structure, something like a geometrical point.¹⁵ Not so Kollwitz: in two

¹⁵ “[W]hile one might have supposed that the severed, epigrammatic quality of the prose in *Gravity and Grace* came from being excerpted, to return to the notebooks in their entirety is to see the same aphoristic fragments devoid of personal reference and generative occasion—no dates for given entries; no situating event; no proper names; minimal elaboration of ideas, which are often set forth in short, juxtaposed paragraphs—as if content has been torn away, ideas revealing themselves whole but in isolation. (Such desituating is not characteristic of Weil’s factory notebooks, where the goal is to historicize the conditions of work.)
sentences she uses “I” six times, and it is not a grammatical placeholder. Instead it is part of a searching statement of the ongoing discovery of her own calling. If necessity is the idea hovering behind Weil’s passage, with its implication of impersonality, then it is calling that hovers behind Kollwitz’s passage, with its implication not only of particular personhood, but of relationship (to the one doing the calling, or giving the task) and of narrative (the story of the calling and of its working out in the called one’s life).

As a child, Kollwitz was tutored by her maternal grandfather Julius Rupp. Rupp was a Lutheran pastor with ten children who was excommunicated for claiming that the Athanasian creed violates freedom of conscience, and then founded a social-justice-centered free church at a time when non-state churches were enormously rare in Germany. Though she said she found his teaching overbearing and moralistic, she also said that she took with her throughout her life his maxim that “eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe,” “a gift is a task.” When Kollwitz writes of the “task of being an advocate,” the word she uses for “task” is “Aufgabe,” the word from her grandfather’s maxim. The diary passage about her task of being an advocate is connected to her grandfather’s maxim, which makes the point that God’s gifts to us are also our tasks in the world.

Although the ‘I’ figures in this prose, it has been deprived of particularity; it is positional rather than substantive, an abstraction, an ‘I’ that is a figure” (Cameron, “The Practice of Attention: Wei’s Performance of Impersonality,” Impersonality, 111).
Weil’s image of the sea is meant to help us see the conditions that sometimes produce human suffering, but to see them from a new angle, to imagine what the world looks like from outside our own perspectives. This means not treating human suffering as ultimate, as that which defines reality. It means practicing perspectival flexibility, imagining the world as organized around something other than our concerns, or our needs, or even our continued existence. Kollwitz’s account of the burden of her own calling (advocating for the suffering, speaking out the massive and seemingly endless suffering of people) seems at first to go straight against Weil’s striving for impersonality.

Weil seems heartless, as though she is implying that it should simply not matter to us

16 “C’est l’énergie supplémentaire qui met l’âme dans le domaine du conditionnel. On se dit « je veux bien faire deux kilomètres si je peux trouver un œuf ». C’est que, même fatigué, on a de la force pour deux kilomètres. Mais l’épuisement total, c’est le sentiment : « Même pour sauver ma vie je ne ferais pas dix mètres. » Cela correspond à un état où l’énergie végétative est mise à nu, où la marche brûlerait une énergie indispensable aux fonctions même de la vie, aux échanges vitaux. / Au reste, la sensibilité étant un indicateur parfois defectueux, le sentiment d’épuisement peut apparaître avant que l’état d’épuisement ait commencé, ou après. Mais psychologiquement, c’est sans doute le sentiment qui compte. / Entre dans cet état, les intentions comportant un ajustement des résultats et des intentions sont remplacées par des besoins immédiats et inconditionnés. C’est alors que l’âme crie : « Il faut » / Il faut que je voie *** Il faut que je m’arrête [193] faut que je mange ! Il faut que je boive ! Il faut que cette douleur soit suspendue au moins un instant ! / Répondre froidement et cyniquement, comme Talleyrand au mendiant : je n’en vois pas la nécessité” (OC 6.4, 267-68).

“... It is the supplementary energy that places the soul in the sphere of the conditional. One says ‘I’m prepared to go two kilometers if I can get an egg.’ So one has the strength for two kilometers in spite of feeling tired. But total exhaustion is the feeling: ‘I couldn’t go ten yards, even to save my life.’ This corresponds to a state in which the vegetative energy is all that is left, in which walking would use up an energy which is indispensable for the maintenance of the vital functions themselves…. / It is then that the soul cries ‘I must…!’ / I must see so-and-so! I must rest! I must eat! I must drink! This pain must abate for just a moment! / One should then reply coldly and cynically, like Talleyrand to the beggar, I don’t see the necessity” (First and Last Notebooks, 233).
when ships are wrecked; and Kollwitz seems focused exclusively on a human
perspective, as though human suffering might be all that matters.

But these impressions are both inaccurate. Weil’s example of a piece of art that
conveys the beauty of necessity is the *Iliad*, which she interprets as an extended
dramatization of the human cost of attempted alliances with force (more on this below).
She reads the poem as a lament, and values it because it does not take sides—the
Trojans’ and the Greeks’ losses, she thinks, are described with impartial compassion,
and are equally mourned: “Nothing precious is scorned, whether or not death is its
destiny; everyone’s unhappiness is laid bare without dissimulation or disdain; no man is
set above or below the condition common to all men; whatever is destroyed is regretted.
Victors and vanquished are brought equally near us; under the same head, both are seen
as counterparts of the poet, and the listener as well.”¹⁷ Her point, then, is not that we
ought to watch ships sink without feeling anything about their sinking, or about the
human lives lost, or about the pain of the drowning. Similarly, Kollwitz, while she is
focused on expressing human suffering, is writing here about her calling to speak on
behalf of the suffering of others, which also involves flexibility in perspective, and the
willingness to imagine the world from a point of view outside her own.

¹⁷ “Rien de précieux, destiné ou non à périr, n’est méprisé ; la misère de tous est exposée sans
dissimulation ni dédain ; aucun homme n’est placé au-dessus de la condition commune à tous les
hommes ; tout ce qui est détruit est regretté. Vainqueurs et vaincus sont également proches, sont
au même titre les semblables du poète et de l’auditeur” (“L’*Iliade* ou le poème de la force,” *OC*
The word Kollwitz uses is “aussprechen,“ which means “to give voice to,” “to pronounce,” literally “to speak out.” In Kollwitz’s work, the line between speaking for the suffering of others and speaking for her own suffering is often blurry, as for example when she explores the theme of mothers protecting children. Even before her son Peter’s death in WWI, the possibility of losing children in war (as soldiers or as civilian casualties) was vividly present to her. After his death it was real, the defining sorrow (probably the defining experience) of the second half of her life. In this particular case, however, Kollwitz is imagining children’s fear, not that of mothers. As in her images meant to improve the working conditions of home workers, or to alleviate starvation in cities she did not live in, the piece she describes working on is mainly about the suffering of people other than herself. It is the suffering “of people” which she feels called to speak out, not “my suffering.” I translated the noun Kollwitz uses to describe her calling as “advocate.” The German is “Anwalt,” which, in contemporary usage, appears almost only as “Rechtsanwalt,” meaning “attorney,” but even now a secondary meaning is “advocate, defender, supporter.” Kollwitz clearly has the older meaning in mind. This makes her calling explicitly a matter of considering the world from a perspective other than her own.

Weil thinks the sea is beautiful, and serves as an excellent model for human beings, because of its perfect obedience. Calling is likewise a matter of obedience, of faithful response to a caller who is outside us, and to a duty that is both personal (my
calling is my duty, not your duty) and impersonal (my calling does not depend on my mood, and is outside my control; I can answer “yes” or “no,” but I cannot change the call). Necessity and calling, while they are different beginning points for thinking about suffering, are deeply compatible; and the fact of their compatibility is part of what Kollwitz and Weil together have to offer us. That compatibility is not only a matter of two different frameworks that happen to be complementary. Instead, I am arguing that while Kollwitz and Weil are (at least in the above passages) taking different starting points, the way they understand life, duty, and their place in the world is similar, if we trace them out. I have paired the epigraphs above as though it were in general Weil’s position to write about the beauty of the sea rather than the heartbreak of shipwreck, and in general Kollwitz’s position to consider personal engagement with suffering rather than taking a larger and more impersonal perspective on the world. Neither of these is the case, and in fact I see Weil and Kollwitz as connecting so well on this topic because there are elements of impersonality in Kollwitz’ work, and of passionate individual engagement in Weil’s work.

There is, for example, a surprising congruence between Kollwitz’s diaries and Weil’s notebooks: Kollwitz has no philosophical commitment to avoiding the first person, and writes freely of her own struggles, anxieties, and emotions in making her
work, progressing in her career, or experiencing the political events around her. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of third-person reportage in Kollwitz’ s diaries, reporting of other people’s feelings and of political occurrences. The pronoun “we” is at least as common as “I.” Often, the “I” or “we” is left out in a kind of shorthand, in a move that may stem from a need for compression or efficiency, but that produces an effect of detachment not unlike the effect of Weil’s own goal of avoiding “I.”

Likewise, when Weil does write directly about herself (as in her late letters to Father Perrin about her spiritual history and the question of baptism), she frequently speaks in terms of calling, and her own calling is much more idiosyncratically particular than the calling Kollwitz describes. One part of the calling Weil describes is to be Christian outside the church—to challenge the Catholic Church to true catholicity and universality by refusing to cross its threshold while it remains (as she sees it) exclusive and provincial. The point here is not to comment on the theology of Weil’s sense of calling, but to point out the importance of that idea to her, and the specificity of her own

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18 Examples abound. One, in which her artistic career and Berlin art politics coincide, is a passage from the end of January 1919, in which she describes her ambivalence at the news that she has been elected to the Academy of Arts. This is, she admits, a great honor; and yet she also finds it embarrassing, because “the academy belongs to those rather fusty institutions, which ought to be gotten rid of.” Her friend Gaul, she reports, disagrees with her sharply, saying that under the new regime the Academy will regain life and independence. (“Freitag, 31. Januar 1919 Secessionsversammlung. Höre von Klimsch und Gaul, daß ich in die Akademie der Künste gewählt bin. Große Ehre, aber ein bißchen peinlich für mich. Die Akademie gehört doch zu den etwas verzopften Instituten, die beiseite gebracht werden sollten. Gaul spricht ganz böse dagegen, sagt, daß unter vorigem Regime es ein machtloses und unselbständiges Institut war, daß es jetzt seine Selbständigkeit hat und wieder Leben kriegen wird” (Tagebücher, 404).)
sense of calling. Her proposal to the Free French (to parachute nurses behind the front lines of fighting in order to care for the wounded and dying without regard for the nurses’ own safety, and thus to provide the unmatched moral encouragement of willing sacrifice, which Weil thought far exceeded any material benefit the nurses might succeed at conferring) can be understood in similar terms: Weil wanted to be one of the nurses not because she thought herself particularly skilled or well-suited (she was clumsy and subject to migraines), but because she felt called to share in the soldiers’ suffering. One way of framing her death is to say that she died of a broken heart over her inability to share in the French people’s wartime sufferings.

19 Janiaud discusses Weil’s idea of effective action in a way that clarifies Weil’s sense of the nature of calling (her own and others’). He examines in particular Weil’s close connection between attention and action, her claims that true attention will necessarily lead to just action. “Action efficace,” which is right action, effective action, free action, is on the one hand action that results from attention consisting in accurate and comprehensive consideration of the facts (“...cette faculté, propre à l’homme d’action véritable, de passer froidement en revue tous les éléments de n’importe quelle situation, et de maintenir pourtant cette analyse, menée avec une probité théorique sans reproche, orientée tout entière vers l’action immédiate” (“Conditions d’une révolution allemande. Et maintenant?, par Léon Trotsky”, OC 2.1, 108)). On the other hand, “action efficace” is a matter of attention in a spiritual sense, in the same sense in which pure attention equals prayer. In this second sense, “action efficace” is abandoning oneself to the will of God: “L’attention supérieure rend possible, quant à elle, l’abandon à une impulsion transcendante. [...] L’action juste est toujours de celles que l’on ne peut pas ne pas accomplir” (Janiaud, 90). Here Janiaud points out the role of Weil’s study of Arjuna’s dilemma in the Gîtâ, which adds to Weil’s sense of “transcendent impulsion” the complexity of social necessities (see the discussion of dharma in the previous chapter).

20 Eric Springsted describes Weil’s death in this way, citing a letter of Weil’s included in Simone Pétrement’s biography, in which Weil writes not long before her death that if she is isolated from France much longer, it will break her heart (“Beyond the Personal: Weil’s Critique of Maritain,” 209-10, citing Pétrement, La vie de Simone Weil, 627).
3.3 Difficulty, Hesitation, and Exposure

Let me return now to the value and difficulty of seeing or knowing other people’s suffering, or as Kollwitz puts it, “knowing the suffering of the world.” Such knowing, for both Weil and Kollwitz, both is and is not linked to action. It is not linked to action in the sense that both Weil and Kollwitz insist that it is valuable in a way that is not necessarily or quantifiably dependent on its leading to action (for Weil, attention to affliction already begins to alleviate it). At the same time, for both Weil and Kollwitz, knowledge of and attention to suffering is inseparable from action. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Weil is explicit in her claim not only that attention leads to action, but that attention and action are mutually constitutive, that one cannot meaningfully have one without the other. Similarly, Kollwitz is explicit in her aim to make art (which is inherently about calling viewers into attention to something) that leads, through action, to improved social conditions, and to aid for the suffering. This is at least part of what she means when she writes, again in her diary, “I want to be effective in this time, in which people are so lost and in need of help.”21 I mentioned in the introduction that Kollwitz uses the word “wirken,” which is related to the English word “work,” and implies an action, usually a repetitive or ongoing one, that has a clear effect in the outside world. “Ich will wirken” means both “I want to work” and “I want to make a

21 “Ich bin einverstanden damit, daß meine Kunst Zwecke hat. Ich will wirken in dieser Zeit, in der die Menschen so ratlos und hilfsbedürftig sind” (Die Tagebücher, 4. Dezember 1922, p. 542, emphasis Kollwitz’s).
difference.” Clearly, neither Weil nor Kollwitz is interested in a contemplation of suffering that holds itself aloof from action.

One way of thinking of the relationship between seeing suffering and acting to alleviate suffering is Weil’s idea of “hesitation.” Weil writes that when the power differential between two people (or even two groups of people) is large enough, then the less powerful one does not impose on the more powerful one “that halt, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity.”22 Weil writes that neither justice (right concern for the welfare of others) nor prudence (right concern for one’s own welfare) is possible without this hesitation. If power is more or less evenly distributed, then we usually hesitate without even having to think about it. We are aware of the other person’s ability to affect us, and so factoring him or her into our decisions does not require a moral effort; it is a matter of self-interest. But if the power differential in a situation is so steep that it is hard for the more powerful person to imagine anything the less powerful person could do to that would make any difference, then self-interest vanishes from the equation, usually taking with it much more of our concern for others than is comfortable to admit. It is this kind of situation that Weil has

22 “L’Iliade ou le poème de la force,” OC 2.3, 236, English in “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 14. And this: “Celui qui possède la force marche dans un milieu non résistant, sans que rien, dans la matière humaine autour de lui, soit de nature à susciter entre l’élán et l’acte ce bref intervalle où loge la pensée. Où la pensée n’a pas de place, la justice ni la prudence n’en ont” (Ibid.). (“The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence” (“The Iliad,” 13-14).)
in mind when she writes that “the supernatural virtue of justice consists in behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship.” Hesitating lets us take account of the other person and the implications of her presence for us, and for the action we are about to take. We can hesitate in all sorts of ways without paying attention to another person, but we cannot, Weil thinks, pay attention to the people with whom we interact without some form of hesitation.

In her essay “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” Cora Diamond describes the need for a similar kind of hesitation. Diamond says that philosophy can, in discussing certain things, deflect from them—not only fail to do them justice but fail to talk about the thing in question at all. There are, Diamond writes, difficulties in reality—situations or moments in which we cannot make sense of something even though it is clearly happening in front of us. Diamond begins her essay with Cavell’s description, in “Knowing and Acknowledging,” of a philosopher who has an appreciation of something appalling: that I may be suffering, and my suffering be utterly unknown or uncared about; ‘and that others may be suffering and I not know.’ But the philosopher’s understanding is deflected; the issue becomes deflected, as the philosopher thinks it or rethinks it in the language of philosophical scepticism. And philosophical responses to that scepticism, e.g. demonstrations that it is confused, further deflect from the truth here.

25 Diamond, 11-12, paraphrasing Cavell in “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 260.
Diamond uses Cavell’s term *deflection* to describe “what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.”  

26 One of her examples is J. M. Coetzee’s fictional character Elizabeth Costello, who lives with an overwhelming awareness of the suffering of animals at the hands of human beings. The difficulty in reality in this example is Costello’s visceral feeling that what humans do to animals matches the Holocaust in its horror. Some moral philosophers, Diamond writes, respond to this difficulty with arguments for and against the morality of eating animals. Diamond calls such arguments deflection: while they address a problem in the vicinity of Costello’s difficulty, they do not actually address the difficulty itself.  

27 Diamond lists other examples of difficulties in reality, among them the experience described by the speaker in a Ted Hughes poem, of looking at a photograph of six men who have since died in war, and feeling unable to take in the fact of seeing them present in the photo while also knowing they are dead.  

28 Responding to this speaker by explaining the mechanics of photography is also deflection. Deflection denies the difficulty, saying in effect, “We can solve this, either with information or with arguments about the right thing to do. There need be no difficulty here.”

26 Diamond, 12  
27 Diamond, 3ff.  
Diamond points out that difficulties in reality are perspectival. Things that astonish one person, that seem inconceivable and affect one person as though they were a miracle (a conceptually impossible and yet empirically present thing) can, to another person, seem straightforwardly explainable. This is not because there is anything wrong with either person; only sometimes these things strike us with a kind of power that we can’t process, and other times they seem explainable. Sometimes they knock us out of the fabric of reality and sometimes not. In order to avoid deflecting into explanation that is irrelevant to the actual difficulty, Diamond proposes that the person to whom an explanation is obvious refrain from trying to explain away the other person’s astonishment. She asks that the person who is not feeling thrown by the difficulty sit with the thrown person, accepting the difficulty.

Diamond describes an incident in Ruth Klüger’s memoir *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*. Klüger writes of “her own astonishment and awe at the act of the young woman at Auschwitz who first encouraged a terrified child, Ruth at 12, to tell a lie that might help save her life, and who then stood up for her, got her through a selection. Klüger says that she tells the story in wonder, that she has never ceased to wonder at that girl’s doing, the ‘incomparable and inexplicable’ goodness that touched her that day.” 29 When Klüger tells this story in wonder, she writes elsewhere, “people

wonder at my wonder. They say, okay, some persons are altruistic. We understand that; it doesn’t surprise us. The girl who helped you was one of those who liked to help.”

Reflecting on her memoir, Klüger asks for a different response from readers. She asks them “not just to look at the scene but to listen to her and not take apart what happened, to ‘absorb it’ as she tells it. She asks for a kind of imagination that can inhabit her own continued astonishment. The ‘taking apart’ that she asks us to eschew would be a distancing from the story, a fitting of what went into this or that way of handling things, a deflecting from the truth.”

Put in Weilian terms, the “absorbing” rather than deflecting that Diamond describes is attention. It is also what the photographer Walter Mason describes as happening when tourists come into the Neue Wache, Germany’s national memorial to the victims of war and tyranny, on Berlin’s busy Unter den Linden boulevard. The single-roomed building now houses a version of Kollwitz’s sculpture *Mother with Dead Son*, but it has a long and varied history that encapsulates the political turmoil that shaped Berlin especially over the course of the twentieth century. The Neue Wache (“New Watch” or “New Guard”), also known as “Schinkels Neue Wache,” was first commissioned by Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia and designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1818, and served as royal guard house until the fall of the German monarchy.

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30 Klüger, 108 quoted by Diamond, 14.
31 Diamond, 14; Klüger, 108-09.
after World War I. In 1931, Prussia commissioned a redesign to turn the building into a memorial to those who died in the first world war. A few years later, under National Socialism, the Neue Wache was a key part of the Wehrmacht’s annual Heldengedenktag (“Day of Memorial to Heroes”). It was heavily damaged by bombs at the end of World War II, was part of the Soviet section in the Allied occupation, and became part of East Berlin after Soviet takeover in 1949. It stood in ruins for almost a decade, and then, starting in 1957, was rebuilt by Soviet authorities and reopened in 1960 as a “Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism,” with the remains of an unknown soldier and an unknown camp victim interred there in 1969. In 1993, four years after reunification, the building was again rededicated by the Federal Republic of Germany, this time to “Victims of War and Tyranny.” Helmut Kohl, then chancellor and head of Germany’s more conservative party, had the GDR memorial (an eternal flame inside a broken prism) removed and replaced by an enlarged version of Kollwitz’s sculpture. The GDR plaque remains on the outside next to the newer plaque, and the unknown soldier and unknown camp victim remain buried in unmarked graves under Kollwitz’s sculpture.

The former guard house is now completely empty inside, the stone-block walls and black cobblestone floor bare except for Kollwitz’s bronze, which sits in the center of the room, directly below an unglazed skylight, through which rain and snow fall on the statue. The effect of exposure is remarkable—walking into a room that is dry except for a circle of rainfall directly on the mother and her son conveys a visceral sense of
unprotectedness, of having no shelter and no escape. In the daytime there is no light in
the room except what comes in through the doors and the skylight. Walter Mason writes
that tourists, stepping in from the noise of the street (the sidewalk is only a few yards
from the entrance), fall instantly silent. He is right: there is a hush in the room,
matching the hushed lighting, that stands in striking contrast to the bustle outside (the
Brandenburg Gate with its throngs of tourists and ring of horse-drawn carriages waiting
for customers is just up the same boulevard). Kollwitz’s sculpture, set off masterfully by
the room’s architecture, seems to arrest visitors. The mother’s raw, mute sorrow (like the
silence between sobs), her whole-body embrace of her son’s dead form that comes into
tactile focus in her right hand pressed to her mouth and covering his forehead, and in
her left hand cradling his fingertips, holds people still and draws them into hesitation.
Even children tend to move slowly and speak gently.

In responding to a difficulty in reality, Diamond asks us to attend to the
difficulty (or to the person experiencing the difficulty) rather than attempting to explain
it. Suffering is precisely the kind of difficulty in reality that Diamond has in mind, and
Kollwitz’s Mother with Dead Son, as displayed in the Neue Wache, seems to serve as a
largely successful invitation into the kind of attention Weil and Diamond propose. The

32 “Kollwitz’s statue, alone in the middle of the room, commands a respect that is immediately
understood by anyone who enters. The tourists come in off the street and, without exception, fall
silent. The mother with her son is so wrapped up in her sorrow that she seems unapproachable;
the visitors stand at a distance and partake in her grief” (Walter Mason, quoted in “Käthe
Kollwitz’s Pietà,” Plough Quarterly Magazine).
point here is not that Kollwitz’s sculpture, in some automatic way, transports people into a Weilian state of attention, or infuses them with the skill and discipline to go out and continue paying attention in the rest of their lives. Instead, it is an invitation and opportunity to hesitate, a difficulty framed and noticed and pointed out to us, like a friend who puts a hand on our shoulder and points at something and says, “look.” We say that the sculpture “demands” our attention, that it “compels” us. And it does, if we take the first step in consenting to its presence and the implications of that presence for our lives. But it cannot constrain us to give that first consent.

The Cavell essay from which Diamond draws the term “deflection” begins with the idea of suffering. Diamond adds other experiences (like the experience of beauty or of kindness, or the nature of animals in being so much like us and so different) to the list of difficulties in reality. Attention to difficulties like suffering, things that, as Diamond puts it, make us feel “shouldered out of our lives” or “thrown,” begins with hesitation. What lets me transition into attention instead of jumping into the explanation that may seem so obvious, if I am not the one feeling thrown, is hesitation. In her work, Kollwitz is by turns inviting us into many different difficulties in reality (grief, death, bodiliness,

33 Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging.”
Figure 6: Neue Wache, snow, Berlin, photographer and date unknown (possibly *National Geographic*).
selfhood, poverty, injustice, the suffering of others) by means of a medium that requires us to hesitate in order to engage it.

“So here,” Diamond writes, “I am inviting you to think of what it would be not to be ‘deflected’ as an inhabiting of a body (one’s own, or an imagined other’s) in the appreciation of a difficulty of reality.” Hesitation is needed as a beginning point precisely because the transition into a bodily appreciation of a difficulty in reality is just that: difficult. Hesitation contains “all our consideration for our brothers in humanity” for Weil because considering the reality of other people’s bodies and lives (and the implications of that reality for our own bodies and lives) does not come easily to us. To attempt it, we must pause and desist from the things we know how to do. We must let there be an emptiness in us, a place not filled up with expectations and what we think is knowledge of how things are, or with the exercise of the skills we know we have. It is simple, but it is hard. Weil says it means becoming like dead wood. Diamond writes that “[o]ur concepts, our ordinary life with our concepts, pass by this difficulty as if it were not there; the difficulty, if we try to see it, shoulders us out of life, is deadly chilling.”

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34 Diamond, 13.
35 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 220 (as cited by Sharon Cameron, Impersonality, 142).
36 Diamond, 12.
Allowing ourselves to experience a difficulty in reality leads us into what Cavell, in *The Claim of Reason,* calls “exposure.” Cavell writes that “The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude.”37 We cannot be certain of being right in our judgments of one another or of other things. Diamond writes that “to accept my exposure, in the case of my knowledge of others, ‘seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be’; it implies acceptance of not being in what I may take to be the ideal position, what I want or take myself to want.”38 Exposure is frightening because it shows us how contingent and provisional our knowledge is, and therefore how contingent we ourselves are.

I wrote that Kollwitz’s sculpture in the Neue Wache draws people into hesitation. This hesitation is a close kin to Cavell’s exposure, and thinking of it in this way adds a key element to Walter Mason’s description that people fall silent when they enter the space around Kollwitz’s sculpture. There are many kinds of silence, and the silence in the Neue Wache is a very particular kind. It is not the languid, dreamy silence of a riverbank on a late summer afternoon, or the thoughtful silence of brooding over a tricky but satisfying problem, or the shocked silence that follows an unexpected insult. It is the tense silence of witnessing suffering.

38 Ibid., quoting Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 439, and referring also to 454.
Witnessing suffering is never only witnessing the suffering of others. It is always also recognizing the ways in which we ourselves are vulnerable to such suffering, or another suffering of comparable intensity.\textsuperscript{39} It is recognizing how much we have to lose, how exposed we always are, no matter how well we have hidden our exposure from ourselves and denied it. There is reciprocity between confronting another human’s suffering, and confronting either my own present or past suffering, or the possibility of my future suffering.

The silence around *Mother with Dead Son* (figs. 5 and 6) is a tense silence because it is the silence of hovering on the edge of knowing our own exposure to a suffering as overpowering as the suffering that grips this mother. This tense silence is key to the ethical demand of Kollwitz’s sculpture. Its demand is not the demand for commitment

\textsuperscript{39} Weil argues in “The Love of God and affliction” that it is essential to our ability to live ethically, or faithfully, or attentively that we be radically and continually aware that affliction is a possibility for us. (“Nous pouvons penser à cette fragilité, avec amour et reconnaissance, à l’occasion de n’importe quelle souffrance grande ou petite. Nous pouvons y penser dans les moments à peu près indifférents. Nous pouvons y penser à l’occasion de toutes les joies. On ne le devrait pas si cette pensée était de nature à troubler ou diminuer la joie. Mais il n’en est pas ainsi. La joie en devient seulement d’une douceur plus pénétrante et plus poignante, comme la fragilité des fleurs de cerisiers en accroît la beauté. / Si l’on dispose ainsi la pensée, au bout d’un certain temps la Croix du Christ doit devenir la substance même de la vie. C’est cela sans doute que le Christ a voulu dire quand il conseillait à ses amis de porter chaque jour leur croix, et non pas, comme on semble croire aujourd’hui, la simple résignation aux petits ennuis de chaque jour, que l’on nomme parfois des croix, par un abus de langage presque sacrilège. Il n’y a qu’une croix, c’est la totalité de la nécessité qui emplit l’infini du temps et de l’espace, et qui peut, en certaines circonstances, se concentrer sur l’atome q’est chacun de nous et le pulvériser totalement. Porter sa croix, c’est porter la connaissance qu’on est entièrement soumis à cette nécessité aveugle, dans toutes les parties de l’être, sauf un point si secret de l’âme que la conscience ne l’atteint pas” (“L’amour de Dieu et le malheur,” OC 4.1, 361).) It is worth noting that history all but forced such knowledge upon Kollwitz—where she was, in Berlin during and between the two world wars, she could not easily ignore the fact of her exposure to affliction.
to any one particular moral program. In fact, demanding allegiance to a political party or a social movement as a response to Kollwitz’s work would be a deflection. Translating this sculpture’s ethical demand as “go forth and become a pacifist” is wrong, and too easy. If we attempt a translation of its demand into words, those words are closer to “Be here now. See this. Feel this. Know it could happen to you. Go forth bearing this within you, and do not hide it from yourself.” *Mother with Dead Son* (figs. 5 and 6) calls us into knowledge of our exposure because we do not know the implications of going forth bearing within us the touch of a dead man’s fingertips on his mother’s palm, or the knowledge that nothing protects us from the mother’s affliction. We do not know what it will mean to act rightly, given the weight of this knowledge. We have no guarantee that we will have any assurance about how to act rightly, or that if we have assurance, we will have courage to match it. This is why, if we take the invitation to hesitate with this sculpture’s portrait of grief, we take a great risk: we may develop the ability to see affliction. Seeing affliction means recognizing our own exposure, which is terrifying. Knowing our exposure means knowing our fragility, and knowing that we, like the figures under the skylight, have nowhere to go if it rains, or snows, or hails.

### 3.4 Tragedy, Necessity, and Force

Weil does not often write specifically about visual art, and when she does, she sometimes makes demands for classical standards like symmetry that would disqualify
Kollwitz’s work from counting as art. But Weil does write a great deal about tragedy, and what she says there resonates with my understanding of Kollwitz’s work. Weil finds, in tragedy, the ideal dramatization of her ethics: for her, the kind of agency humans have is much different from the kind we think we have. We think we have the ability to control parts of the world, that is, to make successful alliances with what she calls force, and so to protect our sense of being at the center of the world. But this, for Weil, is entirely illusory. The one kind of agency humans actually have is the ability to relinquish the illusion of alliances with force and to interact with the world through attention. Taking an attentive posture toward suffering, rather than trying to protect ourselves against suffering by attempting alliances with force, means entering into what Cavell calls exposure. The value in an attentive posture, as opposed to an alliance with force, is not that attention will protect us from suffering. It is, rather, that in accepting our own exposure (which is there whether we accept it or not), we are preparing ourselves to meet suffering so that it does not do more damage to us, and through us, than it has to.

Attention is connected to tragedy for Weil because of the way God made the world. Weil sees God’s act of making the cosmos as self-decreation, as a generous

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40 Weil writes that art is successful when it is beautiful, which is to say when it succeeds in imitating the wholeness of the universe, and in that sense functioning as a microcosm of the universe that helps us to accept the order of the world, in its face as necessity and its face as beauty. Successful art gives us a glimpse of the world as a whole, and the world as a whole points beyond itself to God (see OC 4.1, 303, English in “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” Waiting for God, 107).
stepping back to allow space for creatures to be genuinely themselves. In stepping back, God has turned over the workings of the world to its own internal forces, which means that what she calls “blind necessity” rules the world as we know it. Necessity is blind in the sense that human goals and needs and lives make no difference to it at all. It does not punish evil or reward goodness in humans. This, Weil writes, is part of how God ensures human freedom: because the most important human freedom (and our only true freedom) is the freedom to choose to love God or not to love God. If the universe rewarded us for goodness and punished us for evil, we would choose goodness out of pure self-interest. Since it does not, we are free to choose goodness out of love for God, without the coercive pressure of rewards and punishments. Since God is hidden behind necessity, then, we cannot love God directly, but only indirectly by loving the very necessity we are tempted to hate, because it is blind to our needs. As quoted previously:

To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the center of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centers and that the true center is outside the world, this is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter and of free choice at the center of each soul. Such consent is love. The face of this love, which is turned toward thinking persons, is the love of our neighbor; the face turned toward matter is the love of the order of the world, or love of the beauty of the world which is the same thing.”

Decreation has obvious implications for Weil’s account of personhood. These are related to Weil’s lack of emphasis on the Christian doctrine of the goodness of creation; see discussion in the previous chapter.

Loving the world’s order (or necessity) requires us to return God’s creative generosity in our own act of decreation, by giving ourselves back to God through obedience to the order of the world God made. For humans, decreation happens through attention.

But does loving necessity mean loving evil? And how is human evil different from the necessity of the world? Necessity governs the physical world: a rock, when dropped on earth, accelerates toward the earth, and strikes whatever surface or object it first encounters. This, Weil thinks, is the way things are because of how God created the world, and any suffering incurred by the rock’s impact is an unavoidable part of the world’s being built as it is. Necessity also governs the spiritual world, and here Weil calls it “gravity” to show that usually, it is just as automatic as physical necessity. We see spiritual necessity in our desire to pass pain on to others when we experience it. This is true in direct revenge, where we fiercely desire to hurt back the one who hurt us. But as Weil points out, gravity is not only at work in revenge. Whenever we are hurt, it is our overwhelming inclination to pass our hurt on to others in some form, however subtle—even through something as mundane as irritability. She describes the experience of having a migraine and desiring to hit others in the same part of the forehead that is giving her such pain. There is a similar principle at work, though more complexly, in childraising: it is part of spiritual necessity that we tend to hurt our children, if we have them, in ways that result from the ways our parents hurt us.
When we meet it from without, Weil thinks, we are to respond to spiritual necessity just as we respond to physical necessity. We should accept the suffering of a rock thrown at us just as we accept the suffering of injuries sustained in an earthquake. But one place we are not to surrender to spiritual necessity is when it is at work within us. We are to resist becoming mere conduits for pain, who pass on just as much as they receive. Instead, we are to do the work of suffering in receiving our pain. If we do this, we break a small part of the chain of spiritual necessity, and keep that bit of pain from circulating out in the world and adding to other people’s suffering.

Unfortunately, however, the work of our own suffering is incredibly difficult to do: spiritual necessity is indeed as powerful as gravity. And the way out of spiritual necessity is not human willpower. Instead, the way out is divine grace, which is the only power strong enough to work against spiritual gravity, to “rise up without wings” or to “go down without weight.” The way to open ourselves to divine grace and its ability to unlink us from the chain of spiritual necessity is the practice of attention. When we pay attention, we surrender ourselves to necessity in the sense that we accept its effects on us, and consent to do the work of suffering that is involved in those effects, without trying to avenge ourselves or to rebel against things as they are. But in paying attention, we also take the first step toward removing ourselves from the chain of moral, or

43 Weil, The Notebooks of Simone Weil, 384.
spiritual, necessity. Put in Cavell’s terms, accepting necessity through attention means entering willingly into our own exposure.

Recognizing and accepting our own exposure, however, is so difficult that we almost universally escape into denial. Rather than accepting our vulnerability to disaster and destruction, we convince ourselves that we have found a protection, a safeguard, a way of maintaining control. Such safeguards and controls are all attempts to make allegiances with force. Weil writes most about force in her essay on the Iliad. She starts the essay by writing that “[t]he true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relation with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to.” But what is force?

To define force—it is that $x$ that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is a spectacle the Iliad never wearies of showing us:

...the horses
Rattled the empty chariots through the files of battle,
Longing for their noble drivers. But they on the ground
Lay, dearer to the vultures than to their wives. 44

44 “Le vrai héros, le vrai sujet, le centre de l’Iliade, c’est la force. La force qui est maniée par les hommes, la force qui soumet les hommes, la force devant quoi la chair des hommes se rétracte. L’âme humaine ne cesse pas d’y apparaître modifiée par ses rapports avec la force, entraînée, aveuglée par la force qu’elle subit. […] La force, c’est ce qui fait de quiconque lui est soumis une chose. Quand elle s’exerce jusqu’au bout, elle fait de l’homme une chose au sens le plus littéral,
Force has no allegiance. It does not obey human beings and does not care about them. And its power is deceptive: it turns into things not only those who are crushed by it, but also those who think they wield it: “Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and in its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.”

Humans are capable of wielding small amounts of force, but they are incapable of perceiving how small an amount of force is actually theirs. Thus, they inevitably believe they have more than they do, and overcommit themselves, and are destroyed. They may ride force like a wave for a brief stretch, but then it drags them under and crushes them as it falls upon them. This is what Weil means in calling force the hero of the Iliad: it is what survives, and what causes almost all the poem’s action. While one feels oneself in possession of force, it is nearly impossible to believe that force is blind

...les chevaux
Faisaient résonner les chars vides par les chemins de la guerre.
En deuil de leurs conducteurs sans reproche. Eux sur terre
Gisaient, aux vautours beaucoup plus chers qu’à leurs épouses”
(“L’Iliade ou le poème de la force,” OC 2.3, 227), English in “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 3. The translation of the Iliad is McCarthy’s by way of Weil’s.

45 “Telle est la nature de la force. Le pouvoir qu’elle possède de transformer les hommes en choses est double et s’exerce de deux côtés ; elle pétrifie différemment, mais également, les âmes de ceux qui la subissent et de ceux qui la manient” (OC, 2.3, 245), English in “The Iliad,” 25.
and universally cruel. The blindness of the temporarily strong to the true nature of force is part of what Weil means in saying that force turns even those who wield it to stone.

This is another part of the tragedy of identifying oneself with force:

But at the time their own destruction seems impossible to them. For they do not see that the force in their possession is only a limited quantity; nor do they see their relations with other human beings as a kind of balance between unequal amounts of force. Since other people do not interpose on their movements that halt, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity, they conclude that destiny has given complete license to them, and none at all to their inferiors. And at this point they exceed the measure of the force that is actually at their disposal. Inevitably they exceed it, since they are not aware that it is limited. And now we see them committed irretrievably to chance; suddenly things cease to obey them. Sometimes chance is kind to them, sometimes cruel. But in any case there they are, exposed, open to misfortune; gone is the armor of power that formerly protected their naked souls; nothing, no shield, stands between them and tears.46

I quoted part of this passage above to introduce Weil’s idea of hesitation. In context, it reinforces the connection I pointed out above, between hesitation in the face of a difficulty in reality, and exposure to the recognition of our own vulnerability. Weil and Cavell both use the same word, “exposed,” to convey our unshieldedness, our inability to protect ourselves, to guarantee our own safety. In Weil’s case, exposure is an inability

to guarantee our safety from misfortune; in Cavell’s case, exposure is our inability to guarantee the rightness of our own knowledge of others, and therefore an inability either to guarantee their trustworthiness (our safety at their hands) or our own moral position toward them, the rightness of our treatment of them.

Nothing ultimately shields us from misfortune or prevents tears. But Weil thinks that we are in a worse position in relation to our own suffering if we use force as a temporary shield. Attention, to Weil, is the only way of equipping ourselves to meet suffering well. When we attempt alliances with force and then “the armor of power” fails us, as it always will, we are ill equipped to meet the suffering that follows, because we have not been practicing the difficult discipline of attention.

We attempt alliances with force in order to expand our sphere of influence, in order to increase our agency. What Weil means in considering attention rather than the will as central to ethics is that attention is the full and complete development of human agency. Anything other than attention is not human agency but abdication of agency. Even as the fullest exercise of our agency, attention, for Weil, is not so much a doing as a letting go. When it comes to force, the work of attention is the work of recognizing and letting go of our false alliances with force. It is the work of relinquishing coercive power over others and recognizing their freedom, and of submitting ourselves to reality as it is, not as we would like it to be.
Weil’s description of the beauty of the sea in spite of the fact of shipwreck belongs to her account of necessity. It is part of necessity that water responds to gravity and to wind as it does, in a way that makes waves move as they do. It is also part of necessity that water interacts with wood, canvas, metal, and air in the way it does, which sometimes moves ships across the surface of the water, delivering their crew and cargo safely from one place to another; and sometimes lands ships at the bottom of the ocean, scattering their cargo and drowning their crew and passengers. It is a further part of necessity that force moves through the world, and interacts with humans, as it does: that it tempts them to believe themselves in possession of it, that it is far too large to possess, that it renders humans corpses. Attention is the acceptance (or the love) of reality, and therefore of necessity. As humans, Weil writes, we do not have a choice about whether they obey the order of the world; we, like matter, will always ultimately obey, because the order of the world is not within our power to change. But unlike matter, we have a choice about whether to conform ourselves to what and who we are. Iris Murdoch emphasizes that the attentive gaze is both loving and just. Weil never makes this distinction. Her understanding of love implies justice, because it implies truthful seeing. For Weil, our choice is not between alliance or non-alliance with force; our choice is between the delusion of an alliance with force, or the recognition that force has no allies. When we recognize that force has no allies, we make a step toward
recognizing the nature of necessity as that which both hides God from us and gives us
access to God, which is, for Weil, a step toward learning to love God.

3.5 Weil, Kollwitz, and Art

Considering Kollwitz’s work in light of Weil’s account of attention leads to
striking insights, both into Kollwitz’s work and Weil’s philosophy. Weil’s comments
specifically on art, however, are more difficult to relate to Kollwitz’s work. There are
two reasons for this. One is that while Weil is deeply interested in particular works of
art, especially literary ones, and in certain kinds of art (most notably tragedy), she is
much less interested in the idea of art than she is in the idea of attention. Weil is not a
systematician even when it comes to attention, but because attention is so important to
her and undergirds so much of her thought, it is possible to develop a detailed and
coherent picture of what she means by “attention.” Because she writes about art so much
less frequently and extensively than she writes about attention, there are far fewer data
points for developing a coherent overview of what she means by art. What is more, Weil
is aware that she is using “attention” in a particular and not generally accepted way, and
in much of her writing on attention one can see her struggling to think clearly about it
for herself, and express that thought clearly for others. Her writing on art tends to be
much less exploratory and explanatory, and often seems to take for granted that she
(and her readers) either do or ought to know what art is. Putting Weil’s philosophy of
art into conversation with Kollwitz’s work is first of all difficult, then, because Weil’s thought on art is more scattershot and less searching than her thought on attention.

The second reason why it is difficult to put Weil’s idea of art into conversation with Kollwitz’s work is Weil’s heavy reliance on Plato’s thought in most of what she writes on art. Whenever she writes about the goals art should have and its purpose in human life, she puts them in terms of art’s ability to help us rise toward the Good. This poses a double problem with regard to Kollwitz. First is its abstraction, and second is its Platonism. Abstraction is a problem because Kollwitz is emphatically not a philosopher, and neither her art nor her own writing about her art climbs to the levels of abstraction that Weil sometimes pursues. Platonism is a problem because Kollwitz’s relationship to Plato is conflicted. Weil’s thoroughgoing Platonism applies just as much to her thought on attention as it does to her thought on art (she sees attention as having the same goal as art, to raise us toward the Good), but because she writes so much more about the practice of attention and the process of learning attention, her thought on attention is much easier to relate to Kollwitz’s artistic practice than is Weil’s thought on art.

When she writes about art, Weil frequently includes a discussion of beauty and sometimes of truth, which act as intermediaries in moving us toward a perception of and transformation toward the Good. The question of the beautiful is a helpful beginning point for understanding Kollwitz’s relationship to Platonism. In her stated aims and motivations for her own art, Kollwitz sometimes distances herself from
Platonism, and sometimes moves toward it. Thus, in an open letter toward the end of her career,\(^47\) she attributes to Zola the claim that “the ugly is the beautiful” (“le laid c’est le beau”).\(^48\) In quoting him, she allies herself with his literary naturalism, and with the more general trend in modern art that rejects beauty and all the ways art has traditionally been understood as serving beauty. But Kollwitz is mistaken: the slogan did not originate with Zola at all. It was already being quoted (derisively and without attribution) in a musical gazette published in 1845, when Zola was five years old. Furthermore, she misquotes the slogan: instead of writing, “Le laid c’est le beau,” (“the ugly is the beautiful”) she writes “Le beau c’est le laid” (“the beautiful is the ugly”). Placing beauty as the subject rather than the object of the sentence, her version the slogan makes a different intellectual move than the original. Instead of rejecting beauty by dethroning it and putting ugliness in its place, her reordered sentence redefines beauty. This is in keeping with other statements she makes about her work. When she writes about her visual attraction to working-class people in the same letter, she does not say “they were ugly and I was drawn to their ugliness.” Rather, she says she found them beautiful. Unlike the imaginary Zola, then, Kollwitz is not rejecting beauty as a

\(^{47}\) The letter was a response to a 1942-43 survey sent to one hundred public figures, asking about the dignity of art, and including, in her case, the accusation that she is a “gutter painter” and ought to have been a union organizer rather than an artist. As Renate Hinz puts it, Kollwitz showed great dignity especially toward the questioner (Druckgraphik, Plakate, Zeichnungen, 5).

\(^{48}\) Revue et gazette musicale de Paris, January 3\(^{rd}\), 1845, 368.
value; she is rejecting certain classical understandings of what beauty is, and demanding inclusion in beauty for people and images that she saw as having been historically excluded. And she claims that hers was not initially a demand motivated by a concern for social justice. Instead, Kollwitz says she started out wanting an account of beauty she can feel, one that speaks to her emotionally: “What had I to do with laws of beauty, such as for example those of the Greeks, which were not my own, felt and experienced by me? The proletariat was simply beautiful to me.”

Kollwitz saw art’s success as correlated with its ability to “grip” viewers—an experience of powerful art included, for her, an experience of “gepacktsein,” or “being gripped” (here she is following Zola, who rejected Plato because he thought Plato denigrated the passions, whereas Zola saw the passions as a key part of making and responding to art). This resonates with Plato’s own discussions of art and with his conflicts about art and its power—on the one hand, he mistrusts it because it has the power to grip us emotionally; on the other hand, its power to move us toward the Good (which he values) is precisely in its power to grip us.

49 Annette Seeler describes the conceptions of beauty that Kollwitz rejects as “Salonakademismus” (“salon academic art”), which represents the world as “powdered and beautified” (conversation, Berlin, July 7, 2016).
50 Hinz, Druckgraphik, Plakate, Zeichnungen, 5.
Usually, then, when Simone Weil writes about art, her comments and
descriptions seem at best circuitously related to the kind of art Käthe Kollwitz makes.\(^{51}\)
But there is one notable exception. In her essay “La personne et le sacré” (translated into
English often as “Human Personality” but more insightfully as “What is Sacred in Every
Human Being?”), Weil writes about the connection between art and politics.\(^{52}\)
The essay contains a rare example, among Weil’s writings, of a description of art that is strikingly
and straightforwardly applicable to Kollwitz’s work. Weil lists two gifts that art can give
to those suffering affliction. Weil’s description of the first gift is similar to the things she
normally says when she writes about art: she thinks art can provide access to truly good
or beautiful or true things. The second gift is the one that applies so strikingly to
Kollwitz’s work: Weil thinks art can give those who suffer affliction an accurate
description of their own situation, of what affliction is and means: the gift of recognition,

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\(^{51}\) Although sometimes the circuits do yield surprising insights. Weil repeatedly expresses her
admiration of Gregorian chant for its simplicity and purity. If one emphasizes the nearly abstract
purity of the chant, with its insistence on a single line of melody, and one considers Kollwitz’s
insistence on deeply emotional figurative work, the two seem incompatible. If, on the other hand,
one emphasizes Kollwitz’s goal of capturing essentials, stripping art down to the fewest lines
needed to capture the human emotion in question, there is much more basis for seeing Kollwitz’s
art as being like Gregorian chant. The chant pares music down to pure unharmonized voice
without accompaniment, just as Kollwitz’ images pare art down increasingly to unadorned
human bodies rendered in black and white lines against minimal or completely blank
backgrounds. Gregorian chant and Kollwitz’s images share simplicity (even austerity) in
medium, and are insistently and starkly human.

\(^{52}\) This is Eric Springsted’s translation in *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*.  
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of having their own experience articulated accurately. This point, which Weil to my knowledge makes nowhere else, is key to the whole essay.\(^{53}\)

The essay’s overarching claim is that personalism is an inadequate view of human beings, and that rights are an inadequate way of pursuing justice.\(^{54}\) Organizing politics around “the rights of human personality” is thus, in Weil’s view, disastrous.\(^{55}\) Instead, Weil proposes a view of justice that is based on respect for other humans simply because they are human, and because they suffer when we harm them. She arrives at this conclusion by way of a thought-experiment. “I see a passer-by in the street,” she writes. “He has long arms, blue eyes, and a mind whose thoughts I do not know, but perhaps they are commonplace.”\(^{56}\) What, she asks abruptly, would prevent her from putting out the eyes of such a man, assuming that she had the power and the inclination to blind him? Not his person, or his personality: “If it were the human personality in him that were sacred to me, I could easily put out his eyes. As a blind man he would be exactly as much a human personality as before. I should have destroyed nothing but his eyes.” Instead, what demands her care, or as she puts it, what is sacred to her about him,


\(^{54}\) Weil does not mention Bergson by name but, as Eric Springsted shows, she is clearly thinking of Jacques Maritain’s application of Bergson’s philosophy (Springsted, “Beyond the Personal.”)

\(^{55}\) “La personne et le sacré,” Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres, 30, English in “Human Personality,” 326.

\(^{56}\) “Voilà un passant dans la rue qui a de longs bras, des yeux bleus, un esprit ou passent des pensées que j’ignore, mais qui peut-être sont médiocres” (“La personne et le sacré,” Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres, 11, English in “Human Personality,” 314).
“is this man; no more and no less. [...] The whole of him. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything. Not without infinite scruple would I touch anything of his.”  

She continues on to say that what would stay her hand, given opportunity and impulse to attack the man’s eyes, is “the knowledge that if someone were to put out his eyes, his soul would be lacerated by the thought that harm was being done to him.” She writes that “[a]t the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.”  

Christopher Hamilton points out that Weil is not making a claim about some universal feature of human psychology (that humans in fact continue to expect to be treated well regardless of their experience of cruelty), or claiming value and dignity for humans on the basis of some feature of humanness like rationality (that humans can articulate what it means to be harmed when they are harmed). Instead, she is making a claim about the value of human beings as such, because they are human; and about the evil of harm as such, because they are human. 

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57 “Ce n’est ni sa personne ni la personne humaine en lui qui m’est sacrée. C’est lui. Lui tout entier. Les bras, les yeux, les pensées, tout. Je ne porterais atteinte à rien de tout cela sans des scrupules infinis.” Ibid. 
58 “Il y a depuis la petite enfance jusqu’à la tombe, au fond du cœur de tout être humain, quelque chose qui, malgré toute l’expérience des crimes commis, soufferts et observés, s’attend invinciblement à ce qu’on lui fasse du bien et non du mal. C’est cela avant toute chose qui est sacré en tout être humain” (“La personne et le sacré,” Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres, 13, English in “Human Personality,” 315). 
because is harm. She reiterates, from a different angle, her point that attention and just action are not only connected but identical: “There are no other restraints upon our will than material necessity and the existence of other human beings around us.” These limits, however, are not ones we readily accept: “Any imaginary extension of these limits is seductive, so there is a seduction in whatever helps us forget the reality of the obstacles. That is why upheavals like war and civil war are so intoxicating; they empty human lives of their reality and seem to turn people into puppets. That is also why slavery is so pleasant to the masters.”

Weil writes that “[e]very time there arises from the depths of a human heart the childish cry which Christ himself could not restrain, ‘Why am I being hurt?’, then there is certainly injustice.” This idea is at the heart of Weil’s understanding of tragedy, and it is also at the heart of her understanding of ethics, and of politics. Tragedy is successful for Weil if it makes audible an echo of Christ’s cry of dereliction. So is politics:

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60 It is worth noting here that Weil is not pointedly leaving out animals or other non-human living creatures; she is simply focused on the ethics of human relations.
[T]hose who most often have occasion to feel that evil is being done to them are those who are least trained in the art of speech. Nothing, for example, is more frightful than to see some poor wretch in the police court stammering before a magistrate who keeps up an elegant flow of witticisms.

Apart from the intelligence, the only human faculty which has an interest in public freedom of expression is that point in the heart which cries out against evil. But as it cannot express itself, freedom is of little use to it. What is first needed is a system of public education capable of providing it, so far as possible, with means of expression; and next, a régime in which the public freedom of expression is characterized not so much by freedom as by an attentive silence in which this faint and inept cry can make itself heard.63

For Weil, a society cannot be just unless it is capable of attentive silence that is willing to hear the cry “why am I being hurt?” even (or especially) when the one crying lacks coherent words to express herself. This is true in the courts, in labor politics, and everywhere else in human social organization. When Weil discusses what words can offer those who are afflicted, it is hardly surprising, then, that she gives another form of the same answer:

[Choosing words that express only the good] is one of […] only two services which can be rendered to the afflicted with words. The other is to find words which express the truth of their affliction, the words which can give resonance, through the crust of external circumstances, to the cry which is always inaudible: “Why am I being hurt?”64

63 Ibid., 316.
64 Ibid., 328.
Weil goes on to list examples of those who have achieved this. They are all writers of tragedy: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, “Shakespeare as he was when he wrote Lear,” and “Racine when he wrote Phèdre.”

Weil is writing, here, about words; but her examples are all works of literary art. There is an uncanny echo between Weil’s description of the gift of words that accurately describe people’s suffering, and Kollwitz’s own claim that her calling is “to speak out the sufferings of people”—or, as would also be a faithful translation, “to voice the sufferings of people.” Portraying suffering is at the heart of much of Kollwitz’s work, and she is particularly interested in conveying the suffering of those whom grief, oppression, or poverty have left without a means of articulating their own sufferings in a way that will be publicly heard. Weil is insistent in her claims that the cry of affliction is silent; in images like Out of Work (Arbeitslos, fig. 7), a sketch for a print she submitted to the magazine Simplicissimus, Kollwitz is able not only to voice that cry, but to convey its inarticulate muteness. The scene includes four people, all or part of a working-class family. The mother is lying in bed, sinking into pillows that seem to swallow her, with a tiny baby (its head smaller than her hand) asleep on its back on her chest, and an older child, probably a toddler, resting against her side and hip. The mother and children’s faces and hands are sketched in light charcoal, but their shapes are given three-dimensional depth primarily by the chalk-white ink washes on the pillow, bedclothes,

65 Ibid., 329.
Elizabeth Prelinger notes that *Simplicissimus* affixed the title “The Only Good Thing” to the image, and the legend, “If they didn’t need soldiers, they would also tax the children” (Prelinger et al., *Käthe Kollwitz*, 159). The cryptic title and the tangential relevance of the legend underline the image as contextual: on the one hand, the title and legend may be examples of sloppy magazine writing; on the other hand, however, they show us how much contextual political information *Simplicissimus* was expecting viewers to bring to this image; satire requires compression. Even that this is a family is not obvious from the image, although the image strongly suggests it: the way the children are lying on and next to the woman, and that they are totally relaxed in sleep; how close the man is sitting to the bed, and (paradoxically) the absence of any apparent communication between the man and woman. Visitors do not tend to sit in this kind of silence next to one another; it is the silence of familiarity, as well as the silence of despair. The man and woman appear unable to communicate with one another, to lighten one another’s suffering by sharing it. They are suffering alongside one another more than together. And yet there is no violence between them, either; she is not berating him, he is not beating her.
and the woman’s shirt, that contrast with the gray paper, leaving their skin looking colorless and unwell. In the left foreground next to the bed sits the hunched figure of the father and husband, whose body is shaded in black charcoal. He is lit from behind so that his eyes and much of his face are lost in dark shadow. But the shadow’s edge shows us a deeply furrowed brow, and his fists, pressed against his jaw and mouth, show a posture of simultaneous tension and powerlessness.

The wash of white gouache provides the image’s visual architecture: The figure of the man in the left foreground is silhouetted against the light wash behind him, which gives us the shape of the pillows and comforter on which his wife is lying, and of his wife’s white nightshirt. The woman’s head is also outlined by the edges of this white wash, and so are her arms, the head and hands of a tiny sleeping infant, and the body of a sleeping child whose head is between her limp hands. The details of the man’s and child’s body, the infant’s head and hands, and the woman’s face and arms are filled in with a mixture of graphite and charcoal: the woman and children are drawn delicately in graphite on the dark paper, so that their features vanish if one lets one’s eyes go out of focus. The man in the foreground is shaded and drawn in charcoal, with dark shadows on the front of his torso, his forehead, and his face. His face, except for deep wrinkles on the forehead and a bit of light on the browbone and the sunken cheekbone, disappears almost completely into this shadow; we cannot see his eyes at all.
The image’s dimensionality is disorienting. Because the white wash is such a strong contrast against the dark paper and the charcoal shadows on the man, it is the bedding and the woman’s white clothing which stands out most in the image. The white wash also creates a flat space with strong positive and negative shapes: the white wash is positive space, against which the figures’ skin is a kind of negative space, which flickers back and forth: on the one hand, visual cues tell us their skin is in front of the bedding; on the other hand, their skin is the same color as the untouched background, which is behind the bedding. This gives the figures an air of incorporeality, as though they are dissolving into an undifferentiated background. The white bedding, furthermore, seems to have more body than the human skin: it is done in much greater contrast, with highlights and shadows that give the surface of the bed and the woman’s nightshirt a three-dimensional, almost mountainous feel. The graphite shaping on the women and children’s arms and faces is faint by comparison. The only area in the image that is darker than the paper is the charcoal shadow on the front of the husband’s face and torso, as though he is not dissolving into air as his sick wife and children are; he seems to be consumed slowly by a separate darkness. The white ink wash encloses the mother and children and connects them into a kind of unit, but it outlines the man, separating him from the others. He sits alone, hunched down into himself, while the woman stares past him, directly at the viewer, her eyes expressionless and unseeing.
3.6 Kollwitz, Weil, and Tragedy

It is not an accident that Weil’s statements about art fit Kollwitz’s work best when they are about art and suffering. Weilian attention has its deepest resonances with Kollwitz’s work when it comes to suffering and attention to suffering, so it makes sense that Weil’s writing on art would apply most to Kollwitz’s work when it is about suffering. Weil claims in “Human Personality” that the accurate description of affliction is a gift to the afflicted, and this claim connects Weil’s thought on tragedy to Kollwitz’s work. Building outward from that claim, Weil states her view of the role of the transcendentals in terms of suffering, so that her claims about beauty resonate with Kollwitz’s own move not to abandon beauty but to redefine it. As in Kollwitz’s misquoted misattribution to Zola, it is not that the ugly replaces beauty, but rather that she finds beauty in places that have traditionally been called ugly.

For Weil, the connection between beauty and ugliness happens through attention to affliction. “In proportion to the hideousness of affliction is the supreme beauty of its true representation. […] The radiance of beauty illumines affliction with the light of the spirit of justice and love, which is the only light by which human thought can confront affliction and report the truth of it.”67 It is never suffering in itself, and certainly not

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67 “Autant le malheur est hideux, autant l’expression vraie du malheur est souverainement belle. On peut donner comme exemples, même dans les siècles récents, Phèdre, l’École des Femmes, Lear, les poèmes de Villon, mais bien plus encore les tragédies d’Eschyle et Sophocle ; et bien plus encore l’Iliade, le Livre de Job, certains poèmes populaires ; et bien plus encore les récits de la Passion dans les Évangiles. L’éclat de la beauté est répandu sur le malheur par la lumière de
affliction, which is beautiful. Instead, affliction is so powerfully ugly that the afflicted become invisible to themselves rather than confront their own hideousness, and others let them become invisible rather than confront the reality that they themselves could be turned hideous by affliction at any moment. It is not affliction, but rather the attention that makes affliction visible (or the love that makes such attention possible) that is beautiful: “Because affliction and truth need the same kind of attention before they can be heard, the spirit of justice and the spirit of truth is nothing else but a certain kind of attention, which is pure love.”

Weil uses the following image to convey what she sees as beauty’s role in the world:

Beauty can be perceived, though very dimly and mixed with many false substitutes, within the cell where all human thought is at first imprisoned. And upon her rest all the hopes of truth and justice, with tongue cut out. She, too, has no language; she does not speak; she says nothing. But she has a voice to cry out. She cries out and points to truth and justice who are dumb, like a dog who barks to bring people to his master lying unconscious in the snow.

68 “Parce que le malheur et la vérité ont besoin pour être entendus de la même attention, l’esprit de justice et l’esprit de vérité ne font qu’un. L’esprit de justice et de vérité n’est pas autre chose qu’une certaine es- pèce d’attention, qui est du pur amour” (“La personne et le sacré,” Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres, 36, English in “Human Personality,” Simone Weil: An Anthology, 333). In the same paragraph, Weil lists specific examples: “Even in recent times one can point to Phèdre, L’Ecole des femmes, Lear, and the poems of Villon; but far better examples are the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and far better still, the Iliad, the book of Job and certain folk poems; and far beyond these again the accounts of the Passion in the Gospels.”

69 Ibid., 334.
It is an image of a ruined world: there are truth and justice, who have been brutally rendered mute; and there is beauty, who is tongueless and wordless (the French langue means both “tongue” and “language”), who has only a bare voice, which she is using in order to make audible the silent cry of the afflicted. Beauty does not sing a sweet song. In Weil’s picture, beauty runs around barking like a dog to alert us that something is badly wrong; someone has fallen and cannot get up and will freeze to death if no one helps. Someone who matters.

Kollwitz’s three major series of prints move more and more toward images that fit Weil’s description of beauty’s purpose in the world, and also Weil’s description of tragedy. Her work grows steadily less narrative, and by the time she makes the woodcut series War, it has grown iconic, even sculptural, with each image conveying a moment that stands on its own rather than serving an overarching narrative. For Weil, what makes tragedy powerful and significant is that it conveys an echo of the cry of the afflicted, which is also an echo of Christ’s cry of dereliction. Many of Kollwitz’s images are vivid portrayals of a silent version of just such a cry.
4. Attention to Suffering: Difficulty, Exposure, and Lament

4.1 Difficulty, Hesitation, and Attention in Kollwitz’ Work and Life

In the first chapter, I quoted Kollwitz’s 1891 letter to Paul Hey from Knesebeck’s introduction: “I have started to etch and toward that end have done a mass of preparatory exercises in pen. In general I am now drawing much more than painting, out of the practical consideration that I will hardly have enough money in Berlin during the first years of my marriage to rent a studio. And the idea of painting oils in close quarters in which one is living is a sad one. Etching is so much less cumbersome.”

Knesebeck points out that Kollwitz was to find etching much more cumbersome than she had expected. About ten years after moving to Berlin, she wrote a narrative curriculum vitae for the Dresden curator Max Lehrs, in which she described the process of learning intaglio:

Since my marriage and move to Berlin (91) awaited, I asked the engraver Meurer [Knesebeck notes the correct name is Maurer] to show me how to ground a plate and what kind of etching liquid to use—I had no time for further lessons—and then in Berlin I tried, in painful study, to master etching on my own. I succeeded only very slowly, especially as I had two children and was strapped for time.

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2 “Da meine Verheiratung und damit Übersiedlung nach Berlin (91) bevorstand, bat ich Kupferstecher Meurer [Maurer, Anm. der Verfasserin], mir noch zu zeigen, wie man eine Platte
Kollwitz’s artistic practice of attention is bound up both with the physical realities and demands of her various media (from drawing to printmaking to sculpture), and with the lived reality of her own life. In the first chapter, I described Kollwitz’s experience of living in Berlin with her studio in the same building with Karl’s doctor’s office and their own apartment, so that she was drawn increasingly into the world and experience of the industrial workers whom Karl treated. Attention to suffering is, as Diamond puts it, attention to a difficulty in reality, which means that it begins in some form of hesitation. The difficulties in Kollwitz’s own life, as well as her difficulties in learning intaglio and later woodcut printing, are not incidental to the way in which her work invites us into attention to suffering. Instead, responding to these difficulties is part of the of the work Kollwitz did that made her able to produce art that helps direct our attention toward suffering.

In 1906, two years after Kollwitz had received the commission from the Coalition for Historical Art (Verbindung für historische Kunst) to complete the Peasants’ War series, she designed the poster for an exhibit intended to raise awareness of the plight of home workers, women who were doing massive amounts of piecework sewing by hand, 

grundiert und was für Ätzwasser man gebraucht—zu weitrem Unterricht reichte mir die Zeit nicht—und dann versuchte ich in Berlin in mühsamem Lernen auf eigener Hand der Radiertechnik beizukommen. Es glückte nur sehr langsam, da auch meine Zeit, weil ich zwei Kinder hatte, knapp bemessen war” (Knesebeck, Kollwitz, and Klipstein, Käthe Kollwitz: Werkverzeichnis der Graphik, 17, quoting Käthe Kollwitz, Briefe der Freundschaft und Begegnungen, ed. Hans Kollwitz, 23).
often while attempting to care for children and households (fig. 8). After several sketches showing women asleep on kitchen tables in clearly domestic settings,

Figure 8: Kollwitz, Poster, German Home Worker Exhibit (Plakat, Deutsche Heimarbeiter-Ausstellung), 1906, lithograph, Kollwitz Museum Köln.

3 The biographical facts in the following pages are largely taken from the timeline on the Cologne Kollwitz Museum’s website.
sometimes including children, Kollwitz’s final design consists of a lithograph in brown ink of the head and shoulders of a solitary woman. Above the text stating the key facts about the show, which take up the lower half of the image and are printed across the woman’s chest, the woman stares nearly straight at the viewer, her head leaning a bit to her right, her face lit in chiaroscuro from her lower left, as if by a candle or lamp. To her right, the lamp’s shadow darkens the wall behind her head, and her nose casts a dark and strangely shaped shadow up her right cheek. Her eyes, however, are the most striking part of the image: they are only just open, the shadowed lids dark and so heavy that the woman appears to be raising her eyebrows and wrinkling her forehead just to hold them open.

Kollwitz’s mixed reception (with resistance and hostility from certain parts of the conservative political and art establishment, but recognition from other, often more progressive, parts) continued after her initial recommendation for a gold medal for the Weavers series and its subsequent veto by Kaiser Wilhelm II. Kaiser Wilhelm II’s wife Augusta Victoria refused to attend the Home Worker Exhibit unless Kollwitz’ poster was removed from display. In 1907, Kollwitz won the Villa Romana Prize, sponsored by Max Klinger, which allowed her to spend several months in Florence. The trip impressed her, but she wrote to her sister Lise that she would have less trouble returning from Italy than she had returning from Paris for a similar trip several years
Much of the Italian art struck her as emotionally excessive and overdecorative. Continuing the pattern of criticism and accolade, in 1912, a poster of hers dramatizing the housing crisis was banned for “inciting class hatred,” and she was elected to the board for the Berlin Secession, a collection of artists who dissented from the crumbling but still-influential classical-academic art schools.5

In 1908 she began keeping the diary that is still preserved. Entries range from this year up till 1943, two years before her death. In the same year she began working for Simplicissimus, the satirical magazine that published the drawing Out of Work (fig. 7), and using her prints and drawings increasingly as a form of social and political action. She began sculpting and created her first relief (for her grandfather’s grave) in 1909, and her first full sculpture (Lovers (Liebespaar)) in 1913-14. Her struggles to master sculpture increasingly inform her work on paper.

In 1914, her younger son Peter was killed in Flanders. He had volunteered and was only 17, which meant he needed his father’s signature. Karl had initially refused, and Peter had pleaded with his mother to convince his father, which she had, in great inner conflict. Peter’s death was the single most formative event of the second half of her life, and had enormous influence on her work. The theme of the grieving mother (strongly present in her work already before Peter’s death, possibly because several of

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4 “Käthe Kollwitz Museum” citing Kollwitz, Tagebuchblätter und Briefe.
5 “Käthe Kollwitz Museum.”
Kollwitz’s siblings had died young and her own mother’s silent and contained grief had shaped Kollwitz’s childhood) became increasingly prominent. Over the course of the remainder of the war, Kollwitz moved more and more toward pacifism. She began designing a monument for the graveyard in which Peter was buried, with which she struggled, sometimes despairing of completing it, until she finished it in 1932. Near the end of WWI, the poet Richard Dehmels published a call for a second wave of volunteers in the magazine *Forward (Vorwärts)*, and Kollwitz responded with a famous and passionate open letter that ends with a quotation from Goethe: “Seed-corn must not be ground” (“Saatfrüchte sollen nicht vermahlen werden”). Her own grappling with the experience of war resulted in the series of woodcuts called *War (Krieg)*, on which more below.

By 1917, Kollwitz was famous enough that there were several retrospectives of her work in honor of her 50th birthday. In 1919, she became a professor and the first woman member of the “Prussian Academy of the Arts,” an honor she received with mixed feelings because it was an appointment to the leadership of just the kind of academic art organization whose values her work had previously resisted. In 1919, her mother, Katharina Schmidt, moved in with the Kollwitz family, and lived with them in the Weissenburgerstrasse until her death in 1925. The experience and struggle of caring for her sweet-spirited but increasingly confused and senile mother is a frequent topic in

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Kollwitz’s diaries from this period. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were killed at the end of the Spartacist uprising by the Freikorps, a government-sponsored paramilitary group. Liebknecht’s family asked Kollwitz to draw him in the morgue. After seeing a show of woodcuts by Ernst Barlach, Kollwitz made a memorial sheet to Liebknecht as her first woodcut, and went on to use this medium for the War series, which she completed by 1922.

In 1925, she created a smaller, three-print series of woodcuts titled Proletariat. She continued making posters in support of the International Workers’ Help (Internationale Arbeiterhilfe), calling for help in starving areas of postwar Europe from Germany to Austria to Russia, and posters supporting the antiwar movement, and published a portfolio of facsimiles based on her drawings, titled Farewell and Death (Abschied und Tod). In 1926 she traveled to Roggevelde, Belgium, to the cemetery where Peter was buried. This marked the beginning of the completion of the two large sculptures of the mourning parents. She completed these in plaster, and the sculptors August Rhades und Fritz Diederich copied them in Belgian granite. She and Karl traveled to the cemetery again in 1932 for the installation of the granite sculptures. In 1926-32, she worked on a self-portrait bust, and in 1927, there were honors and exhibits in celebration of her 60th

7 The Cologne Kollwitz Museum’s website calls Kollwitz’s memorial for Peter (The Mourning Parents (Die trauernden Eltern)) her major sculptural work; other scholars consider the work so personal and autobiographical that it cannot (and should not) be evaluated as fine art or compared with other pieces in her corpus (Käthe Kollwitz Museum Köln, “The Artist: biography”).

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birthday. She also traveled to Russia by state invitation, to witness the festivities commemorating the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution.⁸

From 1928-32, she was the director of the master studio (Meisteratelier) for graphic arts at the Prussian Academy of Arts. In 1929, she was awarded the medal “Pour le Mérite” for science and art. These honors mark the height of her success and acclaim during her lifetime. In 1932, she and her husband signed the urgent appeal to the SPD (the moderate leftist party) and the KPD (the German communist party) to unite in order to defeat the National Socialist party. After the National Socialists seized power, in 1933, Kollwitz continued to support the unification of the leftmost parties in opposition to National Socialism, and was subsequently forced to resign from the Prussian Academy of Arts. Beginning in 1935, she was unofficially banned from exhibiting her work.

In 1934 she completed her last series of prints, called Death (Tod). She found new studio space in the studio collective Klosterstrasse, which allowed her to finish her large sculpture *Mother with Two Children* (*Mutter mit zwei Kindern*), which she considered her final engagement with the subject of motherhood. From 1935-36 she created a bronze relief sculpture called *Rest in the Peace of His Hands* (*Ruht im Frieden seiner Hände*) for the Kollwitz family gravesite in Berlin-Friedrichsfelde. In 1936 she was interrogated by the Gestapo because of an article based on an interview with her that appeared in the

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⁸ Her diaries contain no political commentary on this trip, only factual descriptions of meetings with artists and writers.
Moscow newspaper *Isvestija*. She was threatened with internment should such an event occur again. Paintings she submitted to the Berlin Academy Exhibit were removed silently a day before the opening. In 1937 she had a small private show in her studio in the Klosterstrasse to commemorate her 70\textsuperscript{th} birthday.

The last years of her life include many memorial and farewell pieces. She made the sculpture *Mother with Dead Son* (*Mutter mit totem Sohn*, fig. 5) between 1937 and 1939 as another memorial to Peter and to her loss. She participated in Ernst Barlach’s funeral in 1938 and expressed her sorrow in a bronze relief, *The Lament* (*Die Klage*), completed in 1940, the year in which her husband Karl died. From 1940-41 she processed her grief over her husband’s death in the small sculpture *Farewell* (*Abschied*), arranged like an unraveling circle: two figures are embracing, but one is using both arms and one is using only one arm, with the other hanging limp. This means that from one side, the sculpture shows two figures embracing. But from the other side, it shows the smaller figure embracing the larger figure, whose arm is dropped to its side as though it is already disengaging. From above, the larger figure looks as though it is drifting out of the circle of embrace. In 1942, her grandson, also named Peter, was killed in Russia. In 1943, just before evacuating to Nordhausen outside Berlin, she made her last small sculpture, *Two Waiting Soldiers’ Wives* (*Zwei wartende Soldatenfrauen*). Her apartment and studio and her son Hans’s house were destroyed by air raids. In 1944, at the invitation of Prince
Heinrich of Saxony, she evacuated further, to Moritzburg, and in 1945, days before the final cease-fire of WWII, she died there.

4.2 Kollwitz and the Labor of Printmaking

Käthe Kollwitz’ career is punctuated by three major series of prints. She moved to Berlin with Karl Kollwitz after art school in 1891, and made A Weavers’ Revolt, her first major success, between 1893 and 1897. Peasants’ War took her seven years, from 1901 to 1908, and she first thought of the series War, a response to the first world war, in 1917, and made the actual prints between 1920 and 1922. Because she made them at different points in her artistic development, the series are like mile markers, emphasizing the changes in her goals, values, and strategies as she progressed.

Prints require greater investment than drawings, because they cost more in time, energy, and resources than drawings do. Even the simplest relief printing processes require cutting a mirrored version of the image into a flat surface. Stone lithography requires heavy blocks of limestone ground flat. Intaglio printing requires specially coated copper plates, rosin powders and a means of applying them and melting them (if one uses aquatint), and acid etching baths with strong ventilation for safety. Both

\[\text{\text{\textsuperscript{9}}} \text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\text{\textsuperscript{10}}} \text{Prints described as “etchings” are actually intaglio prints. Intaglio includes processes that may not technically be “etching,” but it seems to be standard art historical practice to use the terms interchangeably.}\]
lithography and intaglio require a delicately calibrated, perfectly clean printing press capable of applying a high, even pressure to the paper on the stone or plate.

Printmaking is a two-part art form. First, there is the conception of the image and its application to the printing surface. In relief prints, the application to the printing surface occurs by cutting into the printing surface. In stone lithography, it occurs by blocking some of the pores of a slab of limestone with an oily crayon. In intaglio, it occurs by scraping into a polished copper plate through a layer of protective water-repelling gum and then placing it in an acid bath, which eats away at the exposed copper.

The second step on printmaking is the inking of the prepared printing surface (wood, limestone, copper) and the application of that ink to paper (usually by placing the paper on top of the inked printing surface and the putting it through a hand-cranked printing press). Some artists do their own printing, but not all; Kollwitz had access to a small printing press of her own after 1901, but she used it primarily for proofs and single prints, and let professional printers make the large editions of finished work. It is not surprising that she hired most of the printing done. Especially intaglio is a highly complex and often dangerous process, as rosin powder and acid fumes are harmful to

11 Kollwitz did do her own etching, as is evident already in the letter cited at the beginning of the chapter, in which she talks about getting recipes from Maurer for acid baths. Annette Seeler points out that it would have been impossible for Kollwitz to produce such a high number of proofs and edits of the copper plates in progress if she had been sending the plate away after each change to be etched elsewhere (email correspondence, March 22, 2018).
inhale. The equipment is costly and space-consuming: hand-cranked intaglio and
lithography printing presses are enormous, heavy, expensive machines. The blocks of
limestone used for lithography are heavy as well; Kollwitz writes in her diaries at one
point that she is having difficulty finding anyone who is willing to deliver them to her
studio). The expertise and skill involved in making successful prints is enormous;
seconds of over- or underexposure in the acid bath can ruin a copper plate, and
minuscule amounts of acid remaining on the plate during printing will destroy the
paper. When it comes time to print, intaglio ink must be applied in a thin, perfectly even
layer that fills every groove in the image, but it is viscous and changes consistency with
temperature and humidity. This difficulty and delicacy make the printing process an art
form unto itself.

Kollwitz was largely self-taught as a printer, and her diaries and the images
themselves record her struggles and successes in learning printmaking techniques.
Alone on technical grounds her series were far from a casual collection of sketches that
happened to coalesce around a central topic. They were ideas, images, processes, stories,
shapes, and progressions that Kollwitz lived with for years, and to which she gave their
final shape through enormous focus and hard work. Klipstein and Knesebeck have
documented Kollwitz' s working process by cataloguing and annotating not only her
final prints, but the intermediate proofs, the prints made to test the state of the plate
before making further additions to the image. They note in detail what changes Kollwitz
made from one state of the plate to the next, down to which finger’s nail was outlined when.12 Their documentary work underlines Kollwitz’s own investment and work in making the prints. Printmaking, especially intaglio, is an art form full of delays. If artworks are like pregnancies, involving periods of gestation and then of birth, then Kollwitz’s print series were births with very long labors.

As Diamond points out, responding to a difficulty in reality without deflecting is not straightforward. It requires what Weil calls hesitation. Kollwitz writes with enormous frustration about her own sluggishness in working, claiming over and over that she lacks motivation, inspiration, and energy to do her work well, and often finding fault with what she does produce (though there are also times when she is cheerfully satisfied with her work). What I want to argue here, however, is that it may be precisely her struggle in making her art that enabled her to hesitate in ways that made her capable of attending to suffering. This struggle to make art includes, after Peter’s death, the everyday struggle of living with often overwhelming grief and with the ongoing hardships and dangers of war and political instability. The halting process by which she made her work fits the halting process which, if Weil and Diamond are right, is an inevitable part of attending to suffering without slipping into deflection. Kollwitz’s artmaking process is, partly for reasons beyond her control, particularly suited to the

12 Knesebeck, Kollwitz, and Klipstein, Käthe Kollwitz: Werkverzeichnis der Graphik, 277 and elsewhere.
Weilian discipline of attention to suffering. This suitability is one of the reasons why the art Kollwitz makes is unusually successful as an act of attention to suffering and even to affliction. It is also one reason why Kollwitz’s art is so successful at inviting and teaching us as viewers to attend to suffering. Weil wrote in “Human Personality” that the two limits on our will are material necessity and the existence of other human beings around us.\textsuperscript{13} Kollwitz’s work, which is constrained to an unusually high degree by the material necessities of her various media (partly because she not only switches mediums frequently, but also does this largely on her own, with minimal instruction, and sometimes under space and financial constraints), is also work that is unusually focused on the cost of ignoring human limits. Kollwitz struggled with the physical limits of her media and circumstances in a way that made her particularly sensitive to suffering, and particularly adept at directing her viewers’ attention to the suffering that results when human limits are (through war, or poverty, or illness) disregarded.

### 4.3 Kollwitz, Tragedy, and Attention to Suffering

In all three of her series, Kollwitz is interested in large-scale societal events and changes, and in the suffering that results from them for people who lack the protections of wealth, political power, or social prestige. Each series of prints is connected to an actual historical or contemporary event; two of them (the *Peasants’ War* and *Weavers’

\textsuperscript{13} “La personne et le sacré,” *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, 13-14, English in “Human Personality,” 315.
Revolt series) are in part studies of labor conditions. All three series focus on human figures. The prints’ relationship to time varies: the events on which the series are based range from the historically fairly distant (feudal Germany) to the near-contemporary (World War I). The series structure time differently, moving from a narrative structure in the first two series, to a much more iconic structure in the last series.

Kollwitz’s first series, *A Weavers’ Revolt (Ein Weberaufstand)*, was created between 1893 and 1897 and inspired by Gerhart Hauptmann’s play *The Weavers (Die Weber)*, of which Kollwitz saw the premiere in 1893. Kollwitz had been attempting a series of prints based on Emile Zola’s *Germinal*, a naturalist novel based on a northern French coal miners’ strike in the 1860s. She abandoned the *Germinal* series the same year she began work on the *Weavers*, which seems to have carried on the same impulse.14 When she began work on the *Weavers*, she was a confident lithographer, but not yet a confident intaglio printmaker. She attempted to do the series in intaglio, but ran aground on technical difficulties, so that three of the plates are intaglio, and three are a lithographic scratch technique. The *Weavers* has the strongest and most linear narrative of Kollwitz’s three series. Kollwitz did not directly illustrate the play, but structured her images as a kind of case study in revolution, with its subject matter drawn from recent history: in this case the 1844 famine-induced Silesian weavers’ revolt. The titles themselves tell a

14 Kollwitz Museum Köln, “Tour—A Weavers’ Revolt Cycle.”

In Distress (Not, which implies much greater desperation than the English word), a woman sits in a tiny room made claustrophobic by the presence of a massive loom, which partly obscures the one small window. She has her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands as she looks down at a tiny, skeletal child covered up to its chest in blankets and lying on a pillow much too large for it. A second woman sits in the corner, her eyes completely in shadow, holds an older child and looks down at the floor. Then there is Death (Tod), in which a man stands, backlit, in the right foreground, partly obscuring Death (represented as an animated skeleton), who is reaching forward across a table with one hand to touch the arm of a woman slumped on a bench against the wall, her eyes closed. Death’s other hand covers a wooden bowl on the table. A child stares past Death into a candle on the table with wide, fixed, feverish eyes.

The third plate, called Conspiracy (Beratung), is a clear next scene that follows Death in a storytelling way. Almost the whole image consists of a room in a rough-hewn public house, lit by one overhead gas lamp. The room is empty except for three men who huddle together across a large, bare table, their faces almost touching under the lamp and the one visible mug pushed far to the end of the table, emphasizing that their meeting is not about food and drink. In the next plate, we see the fruit of the men’s conspiring: March of the Weavers (Der Weberzug). The scene consists mostly of men, and it
looks like it is cold out; they all wear coats, some with collars turned up, and several wear hats. Some of the men look grim, heads drawn down between their shoulders and hands shoved into their pockets. Some look aggressive and wave hatchets in the air. But in the foreground, the closest figure to us is a woman, leaning forward with her head down because she is carrying a sleeping child on her back. The child has its arms around her neck and its face turned toward us, head resting on the back of her neck, eyes peacefully closed.

The fifth plate, called Storm (Sturm), discussed in greater detail earlier, shows the weavers prying up cobbles outside the elaborate wrought-iron gate of a large residence presumably belonging to the owner of one of the factories that are driving the weavers into starvation. It is mostly men who hurl the stones through the grating, but closest to us are, again, the figures of women: one who pries up cobbles and holds them in her apron to hand to a man next to her, and one, even further in the foreground, looking away toward the gate so that we can see her jaw and part of her profile. She is bent over with exhaustion and holding a child so firmly by the hand that its hand and wrist are both engulfed in her fist. The last plate is called End (Ende). Here we are back in one of the weavers’ cottages. A loom on the left takes up most of the room, blocking part of the one window. At the loom’s foot and in its shadow, closest to us, are two men lying immobile on their backs. On the far side of the loom stands a woman, backlit by the window, her head leaning to one side, her face very white, and her arms rigidly at her
sides, fists clenched in the folds of her shapeless black dress. In front of her, two more men are coming slowly through the door, hunched down with the burden of a third dead man, whose arm dangles limply. In the air behind the woman’s head, there are trails of low-hanging white smoke, possibly from gunpowder.

Kollwitz conveys the narrative both through the figures’ postures and spatial relationships to one another, and by their physical surroundings, the indoor or outdoor landscapes they are in. Though the figures are the clear focus of the images, the *Weavers* relies much more heavily on backgrounds and surroundings than Kollwitz does later in her career. The weavers’ looms are shown inside their cottages, and the interiors of their homes are drawn out in detail. In the third sheet, *Conspiracy*, the pub room takes up the majority of the image plane; the men are small in the middle of it. And in *Storm*, it is architecture that signals to us where these figures are and what their actions mean.

Kollwitz’s second series, *Peasants’ War (Bauernkrieg)*, executed from 1901-1908, is similar to the first in its aims and narrative structure, but different in medium. Whereas the *Weavers* mix intaglio and lithography, *Peasants’ War* is done wholly and skillfully in intaglio, and represents the height of her achievement in that medium. In its internal logic, intaglio is in some ways the furthest removed from drawing. Basic line etching does not require the negative/positive shift woodcuts do, since the lines one scrapes through the gum on the copper plate are also the ones that show up black (or ink-colored) in the final print. But compared to, say, pencil or pen and ink drawing,
lithography requires the artist to think backward. In a drawing, one may begin by lightly sketching the basic shapes. Once one has the layout set, one adds detail and emphasis, and the darkest lines and areas usually reach their final shade near the end of the drawing, by having been gone over most forcefully or most frequently. In etching, one scrapes the first lines, then puts them in the acid bath to etch. One washes off the acid, dries the plate, adds further lines, and puts it back in the acid bath, where the new lines are etched, and the original lines are etched deeper, (unless one has re-covered them with gum to protect them from the acid, which is very difficult to do precisely). This process means that the lines one makes first will end up the darkest in the image, which means that from a drawing perspective, one must build one’s image in reverse.

This reversing is not all that makes intaglio difficult; line etching is only one of many possible mark-making techniques. Take as just one further example aquatint, which is used to create gray tones: one washes all the protective gum off the plate (which means the line etching needs either not to have begun yet, or needs to be substantially complete), then re-paints liquid gum onto the plate to block off all the areas of the plate that are not to be aquatinted. One lets the gum dry, puts the plate in a special box on a screen, and then cranks a handle on the outside of the box to stir up the rosin powder at the bottom of the box, so that it forms a thick cloud that then settles evenly on the plate. Then (wearing a mouth guard to avoid inhaling rosin) one transfers the plate with great care to a hot oven, where the rosin melts, turning into the equivalent of tiny
dots of protective gum. One places the plate, again, in the acid bath, and the acid eats away the copper wherever there is no rosin. If one cranks too little while the plate is in the rosin box, the particles settling on the plate will be too far apart, so that too much of the surface of the plate will be etched, which means it will print too dark onto the paper. If one cranks too much, the particles that are stirred up will be too numerous or too large, leading to a tone that is faint or uneven. *Outbreak* (fig. 9), the first plate Kollwitz produced, includes etching, drypoint, aquatint, sanding, sugar-lift, and two different layers of soft-ground texture print. It was completed in 1903, twelve years after Kollwitz left Königsberg for Berlin with only a few basic etching lessons and a recipe for making her own acid baths. The fact that she taught herself the enormous range of techniques she uses in *Peasants’ War* brings into sharp relief Kollwitz’s monumental technical achievement in producing this series of etchings.

Though it explores similar themes (systemic oppression, poverty, and revolt), Kollwitz’s second series goes back in time from the *Weavers*, focusing on the 16th-century German peasants’ revolt. Instead of depicting the same economic structures that led to the oppression of industrial workers in 20th-century Berlin, *Peasants’ War* underlines the timelessness of oppression. The problem is not capitalism as such, any more than feudalism as such; the problem is our hard-heartedness and willingness to exploit.  

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15 Seeler points out that the peasant’s wars were a topic of contemporary relevance for Kollwitz, newly under discussion by intellectuals in her circles as a sample of oppression that had bearing
Though its structure is still predominantly narrative, and the arc is the same as in *A Weavers’ Revolt* (oppression, organized resistance, revolt, crushing retaliation, greater oppression), *Peasants’ War* tells its story in subtly different ways. The narrative connections are looser, agency is more diffuse, and women have more obvious and decisive agency. In the *Weavers*, Kollwitz hardly gives a blow-by-blow of the story of the revolt. But in *Peasants’ War*, even more connections are implied. For example, in the second *Weavers* plate, a mother dies of starvation, and in the foreground, her husband stands with his head hung and his back to viewers, taking up nearly the whole height of the right edge of the picture. In the next scene, he may be one of the conspirators. In *Peasants’ Revolt*, the plate called *Raped* (fig. 2, discussed in detail in the first chapter), depicts a woman alone on her back in a vegetable garden. Her husband is absent from the scene, and the child half hiding and half peering over the fence is drawn so lightly and blends in so well with the ravaged sunflowers that one can miss him (or her) entirely. Kollwitz’s image implies the effects on the woman’s rape on her family and social circle—the destroyed produce, the hiding child—in a viscerally powerful way. But that web of relationships and impacts is less explicit here than in the corresponding *Weavers* image.

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on the politics of the day (*Aufstand!*, 22). She also points out that Kollwitz, with Zimmermann (whose book she read), is clearly taking sides with the peasants, against anyone who, with Luther, would denounce the peasants for destroying societal order (ibid., 24).
Agency is more diffuse in *Peasants' War* partly because the web of social connections and implications is less explicit, and partly because women are shown in roles of agency, which, in a patriarchal context, requires that agency to be indirect.

Women and children are already a key part of the scenes in the *Weavers*: in the first plate, no men appear; in the second plate, a woman’s death is the central focus; and in the plates depicting the march of the weavers and their attack on the gated house, women and children are prominent alongside the men (there are more men; but the figures of women and children are visually central in almost every plate). But in the third plate, *Conspiracy*, it is the men alone who plot around the table, making them the instigators.

The parallel to *Conspiracy* in *Peasants’ War*, which shows the revolution brewing as an idea, is the third plate, called *Sharpening the Scythe* (fig. 3, discussed in detail in the first chapter). This time it is a woman, bleary-eyed with exhaustion, who leans her cheek on the top of an upright scythe, holding onto the top of the handle with her left hand. She rests her right underarm on the blunt top edge of the blade, and reaches around to the bottom edge of the blade to sharpen it with a small whetstone. A previous version of the image was called *Inspiration*, but in the final image the inspiration is implied only by the brightness of the light in which she stands, evidenced by the inky blackness of the shadow her head casts on the wall behind her, and by the feverish light in her unfocused eyes, which both show that she is standing in bright light that symbolizes inner
illumination. In plate 4, *Arming in a Vault*, the woman with the scythe may or may not be present in the crowd surging up an underground staircase, but her scythe, transformed, is present in the weapons they hold, which are clearly no longer farm implements. The woman in *Sharpening the Scythe* is a good example of women’s increased agency in Kollwitz’s second series. Because the links between her idea and the peasants’ actual preparation for revolt is less clear than the links between the weavers’ *Conspiracy* and their *March*, however, she is also a good example of the way agency in the *Peasants* series is more diffuse and less straightforward.

The clearest example both of a woman acting in the revolutionary process, and of complex agency, is in the fifth plate, *Outbreak* (fig. 9). In it, a woman with her back to us urges a charging crowd of armed peasants onward, downhill and to the left, to attack an invisible foe. She is flinging her hands up into the air with such force that her head sinks down between her shoulders. Though she has not previously appeared in the series, or

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16 The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco holds a version of the print in which a drawing is pasted over the bottom left corner of the print (such an alteration is called a “pentimento”), replacing the hand holding the whetstone with a hand simply holding the top of the blade (Knesebeck 88 IV, noted in 2nd Ex. on p. 278; Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, “Beim Dengeln”). In the altered version, the viewer is given a larger hint that the woman is thinking about something other than her work by the obvious disconnect between the title and the image (the pentimento changes the image so that the woman is clearly not sharpening anything). But Kollwitz decided on the image in which the woman appears to be doing what the title says unless one looks closely: in fact, as Seeler points out, the whetstone is not touching the blade, as one can see by the shadow it casts on the blade (Seeler, *Aufstand!*, 82).
at least not recognizably, she clearly has influence among the peasants.\textsuperscript{17} Here, the figure of a woman is not only visually central, and not only farthest in the foreground; she is \textit{the} key figure, visually and conceptually, in the image (and possibly in the series as a whole).\textsuperscript{18} Her figure takes up fully twice as much space on the image plane as any of the other figures, and almost as much space as all the charging peasants combined. While it is undeniable that Black Anna has agency, it is equally undeniable that this agency is complex and difficult to circumscribe.

The fingers of her hands are clawlike and yet relaxed; the woman is losing herself in the one singular urgent gesture she is making with her whole body, saying \textit{Forward! Fight!} She is doing rhetoric with her body; she is not herself armed with a pitchfork. Her weapon, in the final image, is the whole crowd of peasants surging past her. Prelinger suggests that her visual role is like the role of the artist, and that (by

\textsuperscript{17} Accounts of a woman who is said to have helped instigate the revolt are mentioned in the historical description Kollwitz read of the peasants’ revolt in Wilhelm Zimmermann’s \textit{The Great German Peasants’ War} (\textit{Der grosse deutsche Bauernkrieg}), though Seeler reports that she has been unable to locate a source for the name Kollwitz gives the female figure, who is mentioned in the Zimmermann history not as “Schwarze Anna” but as “schwarze Hofmännin,” which translates literally to “black homesteadess” (\textit{Aufstand!}, 22-3).

\textsuperscript{18} Seeler makes an extended case over the course of her book on the \textit{Peasants’ War} series (\textit{Aufstand!}) that Kollwitz originally intended to build the series’ narrative around the figure of Black Anna—in \textit{The Plowers} (fig. 1), there was initially a peasant woman watching; the woman in \textit{Raped} (fig. 2) was initially Black Anna; she was the woman in \textit{Sharpening the Scythe} (fig. 3); early versions of \textit{Arming in a Vault} highlighted a female figure charging up the stairs; Black Anna still is the central figure in \textit{Outbreak}; and in \textit{Battlefield} (fig. 10), Kollwitz initially intended the woman searching the faces of the dead for her son to be Black Anna. The last sheet, \textit{The Prisoners}, which includes no female figures, was not originally part of Kollwitz’s plan, and was conceived after she had abandoned the idea of Black Anna as an explicit central narrative figure for the series.
implication) Black Anna is a kind of stand-in for Kollwitz. This seems plausible: Black Anna is, for one thing, shaped not unlike Kollwitz as she later portrays herself; Kollwitz portrays her own body with the same kind of rectangular-yet-fluid weight. And more importantly, Kollwitz is certainly aware of the ways in which art can urge people forward, and is using it in precisely that way. Furthermore, she is steadfastly on the side of the peasants, of the oppressed, of the factory workers whose basic needs go unmet.

Figure 9: Kollwitz, Outbreak (Losbruch), 1903, etching, private collection.

19 Prelinger et al., Käthe Kollwitz, 38.
and who are exploited. But if Black Anna is a stand-in for the artist, then she is more confession than ideal: the peasants’ revolt was brutally put down and did not improve the lot of the people whom she is presumably trying to help by urging them to fight. The power of the artist is deeply ambiguous, then: it can inspire fierce commitment and energy, but it may or may not be able to direct that energy toward any kind of measurable success. As I pointed out above, Peasants’ War does not so much urge us into one clear course of action as it steadily heightens the ethical pressure of oppression, and the reality that as humans, we must (and do) make some kind of response to this pressure, even if we are in positions of privilege and our response is indifference.

Black Anna’s ambiguity as a figure is brought into sharp focus in the next scene in the Peasants’ War, Battlefield (Schlachtfeld; fig. 10). The German title literally translates to “slaughter field,” but Kollwitz’s focus is not on the gruesomeness of violent death. The scene is set at night, and shows a woman, bent nearly double, holding a lantern in one hand and shining it into the face of a young man’s corpse, while pushing his chin to the side with the other hand in order to see his face more clearly. Outbreak (fig. 9) and Battlefield (fig. 10) are both images that center around the figure of one woman and a crowd of men. Given that, they could hardly be more different. In Battlefield, all the energy and violent motion of Outbreak has been arrested. The daylight has gone, leaving a murky gray light in which we can only make out the woman’s outline and the area illuminated by her lantern: her hand, and the side of the young man’s face and neck. The
surrounding tangle of bodies is sketched onto the dark earth, with just enough clarity to confirm the location the title suggests. The composition, too, is static: the woman’s body forms one vertical column, and the horizon intersects her in the center of the image.

Nothing moves but her lantern and her searching hand. The series’ final print, *The Prisoners (Die Gefangenen)*, shows the fate of the men not lying dead on the ground in *Battlefield*. The German *Schlacht*, like the English *slaughter*, implies the killing of animals. *The Prisoners* continues this theme: the men stand tied and herded together into a rope

**Figure 10**: Kollwitz, *Battlefield (Schlachtfeld)*, 1907, etching and aquatint, private collection.
enclosure, like hobbled cattle (or even like inanimate sheaves of wheat). They are so tightly packed that a young boy in the foreground (for whom Kollwitz’s son Peter served as the model), who has either fainted or fallen asleep, is held upright against the ropes by the press of bodies behind him. The man standing next to him, whose arms are folded across his chest and laced tightly in place with rope, is looking down in the boy’s general direction, and standing with his wood-shod feet planted solidly, possibly making sure the boy does not fall to the ground. He, the boy, and the woman searching the faces of the dead in Battlefield (fig. 10) emphasize both that these are human beings, and that force has turned them effectively into objects to be acted upon. One can make the same claim about Kollwitz’s Peasants’ War series that Weil makes about the Iliad: the main character here is not any of the human figures, not even Black Anna. It is force, “that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all.”

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20 Seeler notes the similarity in pose between Kollwitz’s boy and Christ in Michelangelo’s Pietà Rondanini (1552-64, marble, Castello Sforzesco, Milan), because they are both upright, limp-kneed figures with their heads slumped to one side (Aufstand!, 106). She also notes the dead young man’s crucifix-like outsretched arms in Battlefield (fig. 10; ibid., 97). She points out the cyclical organization of the series, and the way in which The Prisoners hints at the possibility of a future repeat uprising, and of a future in which the peasants attain upright, human, dignified existence, free from oppression.

21 “La force, c’est ce qui fait de quiconque lui est soumis une chose. Quand elle s’exerce jusqu’au bout, elle fait de l’homme une chose au sens le plus littéral, car elle en fait un cadavre. Il y avait qu’elqu’un, et, un instant plus tard, il n’y a personne” (“L’Iliade ou le poème de la force,” OC 2.3, 227). English in “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 3.
4.4 War

Kollwitz’s last major series of prints is a series called War (Krieg). She first mentioned the idea of attempting such a series in her diaries in December of 1917, and struggled for two years with the material without producing anything that satisfied her. In 1920, after seeing a show of Ernst Barlach’s woodcuts, she began considering the woodcut as a medium, with some trepidation, since it was a technique she had never used before. She experimented with the medium in her memorial sheet for Karl Liebknecht, hit her stride, and completed the series over the next several years, publishing a portfolio of seven prints with Emil Richter in Dresden in 1923. War departs from Kollwitz’s first two series of prints in ways that move her toward Weil’s idea of tragedy as echoing Christ’s cry of dereliction. War also moves toward the politics of “Human Personality,” in three ways. First is in their mutual focus on valuing and protecting human beings simply because they are human. Second is in their focus on justice as the prevention of harm. Third is in the essay’s description of art as a gift to the afflicted when it portrays affliction accurately and thus makes audible the silent cry of affliction (which, in Weil’s opinion, happens most clearly in tragedy). War also connects back to the idea of exposure and of the willingness to be recognized as it runs through Cavell’s account of tragedy and Weil’s account of affliction and of the cost of seeing affliction, as well as through her account of tragedy, necessity, and force.
I mentioned in the first chapter that Kollwitz writes repeatedly in her diaries of searching for *das Wesentliche*, meaning something like “what matters most,” or “what is indispensable.” *Wesentlich* as an adjective can also be translated as “significant,” which is how it is used in the poem by the seventeenth-century German mystic Angelus Silesius, “Mensch, werde wesentlich! Denn wann die Welt vergeht, / So fällt der Zufall weg, das Wesen, das besteht.”22 (“Human, become significant! For when the world passes / Chance falls away, core being, that remains.” In German, the adjective “wesentlich” and the noun “Wesen” share the same root, so that the idea is repeated in both lines.) The aphorism is from the collection called *The Cherubic Wanderer* (*Der cherubinische Wandersmann*; the German adjective does not bring up images of fat babies with wings).

22 Angelus Silesius, *Der cherubinische Wandersmann*. The poet Ernst Stadler (1883-1914) brought Silesius’ aphorism back into common circulation in his poem “The Saying” (*Stadler, Der Aufbruch: Gedichte*). I include a selection from it in German below; its action centers around the speaker’s discovering Silesius’ poem in “an old book” and being struck by it “like a blow,” so that he carries it with him now and it helps him not to get lost in “dreams with velvet hands” but to return to his deepest self. The poem gives Silesius the last word, ending with the injunction “become significant!”

Der Spruch

In einem alten Buche stieß ich auf ein Wort,
Das traf mich wie ein Schlag und brennt durch meine Tage fort:
Und wenn ich mich an trübe Lust vergebe,
Schein, Lug und Spiel zu mir anstatt des Wesens hebe,
Wenn ich gefällig mich mit raschem Sinn belüge,
...
Wenn mich willkommner Traum mit Sammethänden streicht,
Und Tag und Wirklichkeit von mir entweicht,
Der Welt enttremdet, fremd dem tiefsten Ich,
Dann steht das Wort mir auf: Mensch, werde wesentlich!

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The book was given to Kollwitz by her son Peter in 1913. For Kollwitz, “Wesentlichkeit” is an artistic as well as a personal pursuit, as the poem urges. Over and over in her diaries she expresses dismay at her own scatteredness. She chastises herself for being too outward-facing, too caught up in passing matters that have no lasting significance. She accuses herself of lacking the discipline to maintain an inward focus on what matters. Her desire to live a centered, significant life is tied to her desire to make art that gets at what matters most. Kollwitz changes her artistic approach in War in an attempt to pare down to what is at the core. There are three key changes.

4.4.1 First Change: Printing Medium

The first way in which War departs from the two previous series is in medium: if intaglio is the most complex and involved form of printmaking Kollwitz used, then woodcut is the simplest. It requires only a block of the right kind of wood, cutting tools, and basic printing materials (paper, ink, a mallet). Given a block of suitable wood and an image ready to transfer onto it, one could in theory arrive at a finished print in only

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23 Annette Seeler does not think there is a clear source for the idea of “das Wesentliche” in Kollwitz, though she thinks Nietzsche is a possibility (email, Jan. 24, 2018).
24 The right kind of wood is wood that can be sanded to a very flat surface, does not splinter when cut, takes ink evenly, and does not dent so easily that it produces stray white marks in the printing. Other than that, “right” depends on the artist’s preference, physical strength, and the desired effect. Some artists (like Kollwitz) prefer very hard wood, which allows them to cut in smaller and more precise details; some artists prefer wood that is softer and lets them work with greater speed and ease. Sometimes visible grain is desirable, sometimes not. Kollwitz made woodcuts, in which a block of wood is cut along the grain, so that the grain shows in the final print. In woodblock printing, a block is cut against the grain, so that grain does not show in the final print.
four steps: cut the image into the wood; ink the wood; print it, by putting a piece of dry paper on the inked wood, applying pressure to it, and removing it again; and hang or lay the print flat to let the ink dry. In practice, of course, woodcuts require proofing (testing whether the block prints the image as desired) and then re-cutting parts of the image to strengthen lines, clear out white space fully, or add detail. But for comparison, an intaglio print with only one line weight, which therefore has to go into the acid bath only once, requires at least eight steps even for the simplest image. Aside from the number of steps, the process and materials for woodcuts (or any relief printing technique) are simpler and less expensive. The whole process is mechanical: cut away surface where you don’t want it to take ink; print whatever is left. Woodcuts require no masking with gum, no acid baths, no rosin boxes or ovens. Even here, however, Kollwitz writes in her diaries about the difficulty of the work. She writes that she cannot work with softer wood that is “more amusing to cut,” because the softer wood leads to too many incidental mark and “incorrectnesses.” But she also writes that she feels the harder wood, in her treatment, “so easily becomes academic,” and that in general her woodcuts always threaten to be boring.  

The change in medium was also a visual change. In addition to the mirroring that is characteristic of most printing processes, woodcuts involve flipping the negative and positive spaces of the mark: if one draws in black ink on white paper, the marks one makes create dark lines. But if one cuts a groove into a wood block and prints it, the mark one makes creates an empty, white, unprinted space in the final image. If one wants one’s image to include black lines, one must carefully cut away all the wood around the black line. Every sliver and square inch of white space has to be “paid for” by removing that part of the surface of the wood, so that it will not take ink when the roller is passed across it before printing, and will therefore leave the printing paper unmarked in the final print.

Since Kollwitz made single-color black woodcuts, she was forced to simplify her images dramatically. In intaglio, she could etch tiny fine lines or thick heavy, shade large gray areas with aquatint, and add textures of various kinds with soft-ground techniques. In lithography, greater pressure on the lithography crayon yields a darker printed mark, just as greater pressure on a pencil yields a darker line in drawing. In woodcuts, there is only the part of the block that prints, and the part that does not print. And even though fine chisels and gouges let Kollwitz draw out surprising amounts of detail, the fineness of lines possible in woodcuts cannot compare to the fineness of an intaglio copperplate line. Successful woodcuts simplify images, so that the artist must choose carefully only what is absolutely needed—what is wesentlich.
4.4.2 Second Change: Content

The second way *War* departs from the *Weavers’ Revolt* and *Peasants’ War* series is in content: the images in *War* are both more contemporary and less historically specific than the images in her previous series. *War* could be almost any war, almost anywhere. Ethnic markers are minimal or nonexistent. The people’s hair, where it is indicated, is usually straight and dark. The eyes have very white whites and solid black irises (the pupils are not drawn in any of the images). When skin tone seems indicated it is usually light (although the second and sixth prints, *The Volunteers* and *The Mothers* (fig. 12), include several faces that could as easily be dark-skinned as light-skinned). Their clothing (when they are clothed) is simple and minimally indicated—long-sleeved ankle-length tunics, sometimes with hoods. And, in contrast to the other series of prints, the figures are all we have to go on. This is the biggest difference in the visual content of the images, and the one that does most to remove historical specificity: most of the images in *War* have no backgrounds at all. In the first two prints, the backgrounds include textures, shadows, movement lines, and contrasting rays of light, but in the rest of the images the background consists either of pure white, of cut-away wood (that is, of white with a texture made of the sliver-marks of black where ridges in the cut-away wood took ink) or of solid, unbroken black. There are no looms, no gardens, no weapons, no architectural interiors or exteriors. There are just the figures, just human
bodies and the emotions they convey by moving or standing still, hunching over or lying on their backs, crowding together or standing facing us.

4.4.3 Third Change: Structure

The third way in which War pares down toward simplicity and urgency is in its structure, which is much more iconic, sculptural, and monumental than the earlier two series. *A Weavers’ Revolt* and *Peasants’ War* both have the basic structure of a standard Western play or novel: exposition, rising action, climax, resolution. In Weil’s terms, both series illustrate the workings of the empire of force, though it is not clear whether Kollwitz, in the series, is opposing or supporting the idea of revolution (her diaries support the idea that she herself does not know). But I have already pointed out that in Kollwitz’s *Peasants’ War* (and also in *A Weavers’ Revolt*), as in Weil’s interpretation of the *Iliad*, force is the hero, force that makes human beings into corpses. It is what survives, what is there in every frame.

*War* shows a kind of progression, but it is not a clear narrative, and does not have the revolutionary arc of the first two series. The first three prints have some degree of narrative: the first shows a nude woman, her face haggard and her eyes closed, holding up what is either a newborn or a very young infant, asleep, its tiny arms crossed on its chest and its legs curled up, as though it were still inside the woman’s womb. This print is called *The Sacrifice* (*Das Opfer*). The second, called *The Volunteers* (*Die Freiwilligen*), shows Death as a skull-headed figure beating wildly on a drum, dragging along with it a
line of young men who appear to be in trance or agony. They all have their heads thrown back and their eyes closed, except the leftmost one, who bears Kollwitz’s son Peter’s features. Death has its arm hooked tightly around his neck and is yanking him close, and the young man has his eyes open, looking either at Death or past it, his mouth slightly open, as though trying to focus on something that is hard to see. In the third, called The Parents (Die Eltern, fig. 11), the kneeling figures of a man and a woman collapse against each other, she burying her head in the crook of his arm, hiding her face and hands completely, and he with his head thrown back, one hand on her shoulder and

Figure 11: Kollwitz, The Parents (Die Eltern), 1921-22, woodcut on laid Japan paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
the other covering his face. The skin on his hands and on the part of his face that is visible appears loose and wrinkled, as though he is no longer young. The progression is relatively narrative here: a woman symbolically offers her child; a group of young men volunteer for military service; two parents collapse in grief over the death of their son.

The next image, *The Widow I (Die Witwe I)*, could be a continuation of the same narrative. In this print, a young woman stands with her head turned to the side and her shoulders drawn up, as though trying to nestle into her own left shoulder. Her eyes are closed, and her hands are wrapped around her upper body, the right one resting high on her pregnant belly, the left one positioned as though cradling an invisible infant, in a pose strongly reminiscent of *Maria gravida*. In *The Widow II (Die Witwe II)*, we see a woman (maybe the same woman) lying on her back, her head thrown far back, her skin very white and her eyes closed. High on her chest, again cradled by her hands, is a young child, no longer a newborn but probably too young to walk. They are both completely limp, and though they appear to be lying on a firm surface, the foreground is almost white, and the background is completely black, giving a sense that they may be washed up on the edge of a river, drowned. Here too the possible narrative continues: a young soldier’s wife, left destitute after her husband’s death, drowns herself and her baby (or lies motionless on the ground, collapsed from exhaustion or starvation or despair).
Already, though, the images are not telling a linear story; and certainly not a story that has a revolutionary arc. In the *Weavers* and *Peasants* series, there is a sense of roughly equal spacing between the pictures, a kind of cadence to which one can imagine appending the phrase “...and then...and then.” In *War*, even the five relatively narrative plates are jumpy and uneven in cadence. If the baby in the initial image is one of the young men in the second, then an entire childhood has gone by between the two images. If the first image is purely symbolic, then the logic connecting it and the second image is no longer narrative. And similarly with the images following *The Volunteers*: if this is a story (war; young men volunteer and die; parents and wives are left bereaved and possibly destitute), then Kollwitz is pausing (for almost half the series) in the moment of bereavement. We are shown not only the parents’ grief, but also the widow’s; and then we are shown not only her grief but possibly her death and that of her child. In the *Peasants* and *Weavers*, we get two images of oppression, one image of deliberation, and then images of action and its consequences. *War*, though it still has narrative elements, does not work out as a story, and certainly not as the story of a revolution’s life cycle.

There are two further prints in the *War* series, and these depart even more from a clear narrative. First is *The Mothers* (*Die Mütter*, fig. 12), a group of women huddled together around their children, forming a fortress of their bodies. Some have their arms wrapped around babies, covering their whole backs and heads with thick arms and large hands; some stretch their arms around the whole group, shielding the children
inside with their hands and arms and torsos. In the dark gaps between their bodies, small, big-eyed faces peer out past their skirts and under their armpits. The image on the whole gives the impression of hunching down, of hiding and protecting, and of peering eyes (the children’s curious ones and the mothers’ anxious ones) and guarding hands everywhere. Some of the mothers’ arms even reach across the top of the group, forming a kind of basket-weave made of arms and fingers, shielding the heads of the others.

While there is an obvious thematic connection between The Mothers (fig. 12) and the other War prints, the narrative connection gets increasingly more tenuous.

Figure 12: Kollwitz, The Mothers (Die Mütter), 1921-22, woodcut on laid Japan paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
It is as though we have moved from a revolutionary narrative arc that has force as its main hero, to a series of connected studies of human beings suffering the direct and indirect effects of force: being turned to stone. It is as though force has become so

Figure 13: Kollwitz, *The People (Das Volk)*, 1922, woodcut on laid Japan paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
much the hero that human narrative has broken down. The figures in the first two prints (the mother holding up her newborn and the young men following Death the drummer) are cooperating with the war effort, and could, in that sense, be said to be participating in an attempted alliance with force. But they are so physically and obviously vulnerable that the first two prints emphasize the impossibility, the nonsense, of human alliances with force. By the last print, *The People* (*Das Volk*, fig. 13), almost the whole image is black. The central figure is a woman in an inky black shawl and robe, barely outlined on the left by the thinnest, broken white line. In the lower half of the image, the only white areas show her hand holding her shawl shut, partially covering the face of a child with its eyes wide open. The woman herself has her eyes closed, and her face looks almost masklike. Behind her are several other figures, whose relationship to her is unclear. There are two men with their eyes in shadow who appear young but have deeply lined faces. One is pressing both fists to the lower half of his face, possibly as though they are tied. There is one woman, her eyes pressed closed and her lips drawn back over her teeth in a grimace of agony, both hands in fists, one loosely in the air in front of her, and one with the inside of her wrist pressed against her right eye.

Almost all the figures in *War* are physically alive (though *The Widow II* and her baby may be dead). And yet almost every image also shows people who have been turned to stone, just as Weil writes in the *Iliad* essay, by the direct or indirect or potential action of force upon them: the soldiers marching off to die; the mother offering herself.
with her child; the parents; the pregnant widow; the mothers trying to keep guard over
the children even as the children themselves peer out through every gap; the masklike,
quietly or loudly agonized faces of The People (fig. 13). Two of the prints in War (The
Parents and The Mothers, figs. 11 and 12) are images Kollwitz later reproduced as
sculptures, and The Parents grew out of an actual sculptural study. Annette Seeler calls
the print “practically a sculpture,” and this emphasizes not only the monumental, iconic
quality of the image, but also its stoniness, the sense that these figures will stay fixed
here, like mountains, until time wears them down.26 Kollwitz has, then conveyed the
petrifying effect of force, and of extreme suffering. What is so striking from a Weilian
perspective is that War shows people who are on the one hand being turned to stone by
force, and who are, on the other hand, emphatically and compellingly human. In this,
the series accomplishes attention to enormous suffering, even attention to affliction.27

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26 Kollwitz read and respected Adolf von Hildebrand’s The Problem of Form in Visual Art (Das
Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst), which was written especially for sculptors of pieces
meant to be placed in public places. Hildebrand emphasizes the importance of the silhouette,
urging sculptors to convey action and detail in ways that prioritize the visual impact of the
sculpture’s outline as seen from a distance. Seeler points out that both The Parents and The
Mothers (figs. 11 and 12) are laid out with great attention to the silhouette, to its eloquence and
simplicity (conversation, July 19, 2016).
27 Because it is part of Weil’s account of affliction that the same circumstances will produce
affliction in some but not other people, it is not possible to say with certainty from images
(without further information) whether a person is in fact in a state of affliction. But it does not
seem out of keeping to consider Kollwitz’s images as portrayals of affliction.
4.5 Kollwitz, War, and Tragedy

What is striking about these images in light of my earlier discussion of exposure is that several of the figures in War seem not to be avoiding the awareness of their own exposure. Kollwitz portrays the figures in War as radically and irretrievably exposed to force in its most crushing forms—death, the loss of children, the destruction of a world. Whether the loss has already occurred or remains a threat, these figures are irretrievably marked by the presence of a force which they cannot attempt to match, against which they cannot counterpose an equal force. Even The Volunteers are shown as civilians; none of the human bodies Kollwitz portrays are wearing armor or carrying weapons. Nothing stands between them and tears. But unlike most of the warriors in the Iliad, these figures are not shown as attempting to find something to stand between them and tears. The figures in War are not saints, particularly. But they are vulnerable, and they know it, and they are not trying to hide it: they seem to know their own exposure.

Aside from their simple clothing, War does not locate its figures socially, but it is in keeping with Kollwitz’s other work to conclude that these are people without easy access to the illusion of alliances with great force. Both Weil and Kollwitz have complex relationships to the idea of violent revolt. In the Iliad essay and elsewhere, Weil maintains adamantly that to take up arms in order to end oppression is to buy into the empire of force in a way that makes attention, love, and faithfulness impossible, because it traps one in illusion. But Weil also volunteered for the Spanish Civil War. It may be
that her clearest statement of relation to war is her last (rejected) proposal to the Free French to parachute nurses behind the front lines in order to tend to wounded soldiers and encourage them that they are on the right side, through the moral power of willing sacrifice (she wanted desperately to be one of the nurses, and as I have pointed out already, Eric Springsted convincingly attributes her death to a broken heart over her inability to be with France in its suffering). Kollwitz displays her ambivalence in the images themselves, and in the tension between her antiwar writings and posters and her diaries (where she writes often about her inability to be a communist, which hinges on her unwillingness to support revolution). *Outbreak* (fig. 9), from the *Peasants’ War* series, is full of the unrestrained energy of revolt, but she said to her son Hans after making it that she did not think she would ever be able to make an image so fully in support of revolution again (and in fact she did not). Although Kollwitz moved more and more toward pacifism as her life went on, this was less a worked-out philosophy that opposed war on systematic grounds, and more a contextual assessment that what Germany needed was not war (just as Weil’s move away from pacifism was a contextual assessment of what was at stake in WWII). The woodcuts in *War* are one of Kollwitz’s best and most complex visual statements about war: they show its human, especially

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28 Springsted, “Beyond the Personal,” 209.
civilians, cost, and the emphasize the exposure of the human beings involved in any way in war. In them, she attends to some of the realities of war, and does not look away.

Cavell’s terms *acknowledgement* and *recognition* are good positive descriptions of what it means not only to be the one giving attention but the one receiving it. This reciprocity is a thing Weil rarely writes about, though one might say it is present in her account of friendship and sometimes in her account of attention to affliction: she writes that it is as hard for the afflicted one to receive attention as it is for another person to give it. While one is as stone, one is numb; one does not feel oneself as human, and to some extent one may almost cease to feel. If attention can raise an afflicted person out of that stoniness back into some kind of life, then that resurrection is as painful as the onset of the original affliction. In Cavell’s account in “The Avoidance of Love,” Lear dramatizes precisely what it can mean to be unwilling to be seen. Cavell traces the total breakdown of Lear’s world and relationships back to this initial and continuing refusal to be seen and to receive love, and if Cavell is right, then it is not some small and secondary part of love that falls away if we refuse to receive attention, but all of love. As asymmetrical as it may be, love for Cavell must be a circle of giving and receiving; a linear, one-way account is not an account of love at all but something else, something

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30 Cavell discusses acknowledgement in chapters 3-4 of *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Recognition is a key term in his discussion of *King Lear* in “The Avoidance of Love,” in *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare*. 220
that brings tragedy in its wake. Kollwitz’s figures in War short-circuit at least this part of tragedy, by recognizing their situation for what it is.

4.6 Kollwitz and the Work of Lament

The only person to whom Weil does not seem to accord the care of which she thinks all humans are worthy is herself. Weil repeatedly excoriates both the Romans and the Hebrews for believing God to have authorized them to build regimes of force. She is also fiercely committed to the discipline of learning an attention that does not take sides, and to approaching people with “infinite scruple” simply because they are human. Weil believes God is fundamentally not on the side of coercive violence and that God is characterized by self-sacrificial love both in creation and redemption. It is odd to find such a thinker making expressions, if not of outright self-hatred, then certainly of a strange and saddening belief that God is uniquely violent toward her (as for example in the late piece titled “Prologue,” in which a first-person narrator bearing much similarity to Weil is, by a “he” who is clearly a stand-in for Christ, first addressed harshly, then treated kindly for a day, and then thrown brutally down a flight of stairs and turned out into the street for no apparent reason).32

Kollwitz goes further than Weil herself does in practicing attention to herself. Visually, this happens in her self-portraits. Here I want to focus on one woodcut self-

32 Œuvres, 806-807.
portrait begun when Kollwitz was still working on the War series, and completed by 1923 (fig. 14). The portrait was made for the cover of Ludwig Kaemmerer’s monograph on Kollwitz, so it was a highly public piece of work, definitely part of what Seeler calls Kollwitz’ “knitting at her own legend.” Seeler counts the diaries themselves as part of Kollwitz’s image-management (because she was famous enough during her lifetime to be confident they would be read after her death if she did not destroy them), and notes that for Kollwitz, self-portraits were a kind of brand, that Kollwitz was famous not only by name but by face precisely because she made so many self-portraits and, Seeler thinks, she made self-portraits at least in part for this reason.

It would be naïve, not just in Kollwitz’s case but in the case of any artist who creates a self-portrait intended for display or publication, to claim such a work as an instance of Weilian self-forgetful attention (or to claim for its creation the purity of motives Weil frequently demands). But that is not precisely the claim I want to make. Instead, I would like to consider Kollwitz’s woodcut as an instance of attention to herself.

33 Kollwitz writes of having completed War at the end of November 1922, and mentions the self-portrait definitively in a letter in August of that year. She refers to a woodcut self-portrait that could be this one in the diaries as early as April 1922 (Knesebeck, Kollwitz, and Klipstein, Käthe Kollwitz: Werkverzeichnis der Graphik, 572).

34 Kaemmerer, Kaethe Kollwitz; Griffelkunst und Weltanschauung, ein Kunstgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Seelen-und Gesellschaftskunde. While the April diary entry refers to a woodcut self-portrait without specifying its purpose, the August letter names the portrait as being for Kaemmerer, so that its display on the monograph cover was not an after-the-fact decision, but something Kollwitz was aware of while making the print (Knesebeck, 572).

35 “She is always knitting at her own legend,” (“Sie strickt immer an ihrer Legende,” Annette Seeler, conversation, July 6, 2015).

36 See Seeler’s introduction to Kollwitz et al., Käthe Kollwitz : Selbstbildnisse = self-portraits.
as a human being, an attention that emphasizes the fact of her own exposure and
humanness, even while portraying her face as recognizably distinctive. This is an
attention Weil rarely seems able to accord herself, and it shows a Cavellian willingness
to be recognized, as well as bringing into focus what I mean when I call Kollwitz’s work
“lament.”

I have already compared Weil’s comments about the beauty of the ocean to
Kollwitz’s description of her own calling “to speak out the suffering of people, that
never ends, that is now as big as mountains.” Weil seeks to trust God’s love behind the
necessity of the world, even when we experience that necessity as brute force; Kollwitz
seeks to do the work of lament. And this is one more compatibility between their
perspectives: lament implies that someone is listening, that there is a point in giving
voice to the sufferings of people. The someone listening could be (and for Kollwitz is, at
least partly) other human beings. But in the passage about depicting the woman who
sees suffering, Kollwitz’s aside “could that be anyone other than Jesus?” underlines an
assumption that God sees, that her work of witness is valuable not only as a cry to other
people but as a cry to God.

If Kollwitz’s work on suffering is a lament that happens with the expectation of
God’s hearing and care, it fits into a theological understanding of suffering that both
preserves human freedom of consent, and makes urgent ethical demands of us to
recognize our own exposure and respond to the world and to one another with
attention. Such a view of Kollwitz’s work reconciles two of its important elements. First is her work’s moral and emotional urgency. Second is her political ambivalence.

Kollwitz felt a strong tension between her desire, on the one hand, to make work on behalf of workers and their families, and her unwillingness, on the other hand, to make common cause with communism and revolution, or to put her art fully in their service. She writes repeatedly in her diaries about her discomfort with her own politics, her fear that she refuses to join the communist party mainly out of cowardice, because she lacks the courage revolution requires.\(^{37}\) Considered in the context of lament, however, Kollwitz’s political ambivalence is not a liability but an asset. It allows her to make art that is an invitation to those who are not currently afflicted to hesitate in the face of the difficulty of human suffering, an invitation to recognize our own exposure and to see

\(^{37}\) In one memorable passage, Kollwitz attempts to defend herself against her own internal accusations by saying that an artist ought to have the prerogative to go where emotion leads, without needing to make ideological commitments (for example, she ought to be able to memorialize Karl Liebknecht, the beloved communist leader who was killed by the government-sponsored Freikorps, without needing to commit to the communist party). Then she backpedals, saying that a male artist would probably be expected to have greater intellectual fortitude than she is showing. She finishes almost pleadingly, saying that an artist can hardly be expected to make sense of a political situation as tangled as Germany’s in 1920s—especially an artist who is a woman (Kollwitz, Die Tagebücher, October 1920, p. 483). Kollwitz seems to be writing mostly out of anxiety in this passage. Asking for a pass on political responsibility because she is a woman is out of character for her, and she does not develop her reasoning or explain why she thinks women should be exempt from full political responsibility. The claim about an artist’s prerogative to engage the world emotionally and artistically without thereby making political commitments is on the one hand an excuse, and on the other hand a reasonable assertion: that a piece of visual art is not the same thing as a political manifesto. On the whole, Kollwitz overstates her political ambivalence. At issue is not mainly that she cannot make sense of the times, but rather that she is making images popular among communists, but finds herself unable to share their demand for revolution because she is too aware of its human cost.
those whom affliction normally makes invisible. It is key to her art that while some of
the posters call for specific actions (help to starving Vienna or starving Russia, or
support for particular legislation), her work in general does not propose a worked-out
political agenda. Her art is not code for a political agenda. This lets Kollwitz make art
that is urgent but not coercive, that is an insistent invitation to hesitate, but not an
attempt to sidestep viewers’ moral agency.

Figure 14: Käthe Kollwitz, Self-Portrait from Front (Selbstbildnis nach vorn), 1923,
woodcut, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.
If there is any question about the people in *War* and whether they are willing to bear recognition and face willingly into their own exposure (they are, after all, mostly not looking back at the viewer), there is no such question here. *Mother with Dead Son* (figs. 5 and 6) is literally exposed in the Neue Wache, unprotected from whatever falls from the sky through the open skylight. Kollwitz’s woodcut conveys the same feeling of exposure, of weatheredness. The face is presented against a deep, slightly uneven, approximately square block of black, with ragged edges in several places, and a sliver of white in the middle of the left side where Kollwitz changed her mind about showing the side of the neck, and cut out a piece of the original block, replacing it with a level surface so that the part cut away would print black again. Into this black, she has sliced crisp white lines. There are wide, deep cuts that make broad lines of white; and there are tiny, precise cuts that make white crosshatching so delicate it is surprising to see in a woodcut. Many of the lines look haphazard and wild; the forehead is deeply crosshatched, leaving it looking scored and traumatized. Instead of the crisp edges usually characteristic of woodcut lines, some of the marks have ragged, chewed-looking edges, where Kollwitz used a file along edges of the cut marks (see for example the hair, especially on the right side of the face). In addition to the completely white marks, Kollwitz conveys subtly lighter areas on the face (such as on the lower right cheek and the right side of the chin) by sanding away just a little of the surface, leaving a dusty
gray tone that prints differently each time it is inked and run through the press. The face looks scored, marked, almost burned onto the paper.

All these lines masterfully convey the planes, textures, curves and shadows of a woman’s face. The irises, completely black, are shown only by a spot of light in the left inner white of the eye, and with hair-thin lines swooping to outline their round shape under the heavy eyelids. These tiny outlining lines take the expression on the face from one of calm focus to a dead-level stare, an expression conveying that this face is aware of being seen, and is seeing us.

It is a face that came into being through trauma. There is the literal trauma of the cutting of the wood, and Kollwitz’s mark-making leaves this trauma at the surface of the print, refusing to smooth it out into clean, polished lines and shapes. The filing and deliberate jaggedness, and the way many of the lines cross unevenly, like a sketch done in haste, emphasize the trauma that is built into relief printing (and of course this is hardly a sketch done in haste, even if the woodcut process is faster than other kinds of printing; the apparent haphazardness of the lines in fact convey Kollwitz’s technical skill). Then there is the trauma of the life that produced a face like this—the deeply lined eyes and forehead in spite of the fairly smooth cheeks, the heavy seriousness that feels central to this face, the unsparing gaze. That gaze goes in many directions: there is the way the image seems to be looking at us. There is the way the artist was looking at this face to reproduce it. There is the way we as viewers are looking at what the artist
produced. But then, because it is a self-portrait, the artist is both looking out at us from the image, and looking back at her face to make the image, so that it is as though we have stepped into a visual confrontation between Käthe Kollwitz and her own face. What would be an arresting image in any case becomes more arresting, and more complex, because it is a self-portrait.

Kollwitz’s images speak out the sufferings of people, including, in self-portraits like this one, her own sufferings. And yet, of course, they do not speak at all. They are silent images. They “speak” in the way they present human beings to us. And in presenting figures to us as human, people in the midst of experiences that are at the heart of what is most difficult about being human, her images also present back to us ourselves. Her self-portrait is a challenge: can we meet her gaze? Do we dare? Are we willing to face her awareness of her own exposure, which requires us to be aware of our own exposure? Or will we look away?

I noted earlier that Simone Weil values the *Iliad*, and finds it beautiful, because it portrays necessity without sentimentality or partiality, but also without callousness. It is worth re-quoting her here: “Nothing precious is scorned, whether or not death is its destiny; everyone’s unhappiness is laid bare without dissimulation or disdain; no man is set above or below the condition common to all men; whatever is destroyed is regretted. Victors and vanquished are brought equally near us; under the same head, both are seen
as counterparts of the poet, and the listener as well.”

Alice Oswald’s book-length poem, called *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*, takes a similar approach to Homer’s poem, reading it as a lament and re-telling it with the narrative removed. What is left are lists of names, short accounts of the deaths of minor and major warriors stripped of their Greek or Trojan affiliations, and Homeric similes, which Oswald includes, repeating each one twice. Oswald’s book may do a better job than Homer’s original at accomplishing the task Weil so praises: an attention that values what is precious and regrets what is destroyed, without ever taking sides. And Kollwitz’s work is in keeping with both their projects. In *War*, there are figures who are presented “as counterparts of the [artist], and the [viewer] as well.” In her self-portrait, Kollwitz presents us with a face that is both artist and viewer—of itself and of us.

Weil’s account of force as the main character of the *Iliad* translates well to all three of Kollwitz’s major series of prints, and so does this account of the *Iliad* as a lament. It translates especially well to the *War* series, and to the woodcut self-portrait (fig. 14) made at the end of the series. In the poem as Weil and Oswald see it and in Kollwitz’s *War* woodcuts, the emphasis is on conveying the preciousness, fragility and brevity of human life. As in Oswald’s poem, the *War* series shows iconic wartime

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39 Oswald, *Memorial*.
40 Hahnemann, “Feminist at the Second Glance.”
experiences with narrative, if not stripped out completely, then disrupted and pushed to the background. In Kollwitz as in Weil, the preciousness of humans is in our raw humanness. It is not something justified by particular qualities or abilities or even by a divine command. As Weil writes in “Human Personality,” what makes a human being valuable is simply her being human: it “is this man; no more and no less. … The whole of him. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything. Not without infinite scruple would I touch anything of his.”

In her work on suffering, and pointedly in the Kaemmerer self-portrait, Kollwitz’ work invites us into a hesitation that leaves space for the difficulty, mystery, and inexplicability of suffering, and of affliction. It is an invitation to pause in the moment that contains “all our consideration for our brothers in humanity.” And Kollwitz invites us not only to listen to the visual lament, spoken in the eloquence of human faces and of human body language, but to join in the space of lamenting, and to expect God to be listening.

41 Ibid.
42 “L’Iliade ou le poème de la force” (OC 2.3, 236). English in “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 14.
Conclusion

Review

In this dissertation I have traced out the ethical and conceptual connections between Weil’s account of attention and Kollwitz’s artistic practice of attention, especially attention to suffering. I have presented Weil’s philosophy and theology of attention, including attention to suffering, and used Weil’s thought as a conceptual framework for a detailed consideration of Kollwitz’s images. Although I draw the language and theology of attention from Weil, I argue that Kollwitz’ work lends itself to being considered in this way, and that there is a latent account of attention in her artistic practice and in the visual structure of her work, which includes theological references. Simone Weil commends attention as a learnable discipline, and the immediacy of Kollwitz’s largely nonverbal images serves Weil’s aim here in ways Weil’s own writing cannot.

We have seen that attention, in Weil’s view, is a strenuous surrender to things as they are, which involves the difficult work of letting those things be other than we desire (or even need) them to be. For both Weil and Kollwitz, attention is the only meaningful way of engaging human suffering, one’s own or that of others. My dissertation explores their ethnically risky claim, and argues that attention is not only interesting or valuable but necessary: any genuine attempt to engage with suffering must begin with a discipline substantially similar to the one Weil writes about as attention and Kollwitz
practices in her art. Attempts to respond to suffering in ways that are not grounded in attention will, at best, miss the suffering, and at worst contribute to it. This is true even of actions intended to alleviate suffering. I have shown how Kollwitz visually extends Weil’s philosophy and theology of attention to suffering in two distinct ways: first, by attending in her art to her own suffering as well as the suffering of others; and second, by investing her art with a wholehearted and tactile focus on the human body.

For Weil, it is attention (as opposed to the will) that is at the heart of human agency. Attention is in no way separate from action; much the opposite. For Weil, any action that does not grow out of attention is the moral equivalent of sleepwalking—an automatic, unfree set of acts that respond to a dream reality rather than to things as they are. Attention, by contrast, allows us to begin to respond to what is. When Weil writes about attention she means a posture of openness toward some aspect of things as they are. This can be an aspect of our own experience, a social reality, a physical object, or another human being. Attention is a posture of disciplined and strenuous receptiveness. It is neither a limp passivity nor an attempt to control the world. Because it is both strenuous and receptive, attention moves us toward seeing things as they are in themselves, rather than seeing things as means of meeting our own needs or satisfying our desires. While Weil thinks attention is enormously difficult, she also thinks that it is learnable, and that every human being is capable of learning it.
Attention is a reordering of our perception of the structure of the world. Humans begin, Weil thinks, by considering ourselves little gods, around whom the world revolves. The first step toward learning attention is to begin to surrender this sense of our own centrality, which requires willingness to come into contact with things as they are. Such contact gradually destroys our cherished fantasies about the world, the illusions we use to protect our sense of centrality and importance. Because attention is an openness to things as they are, and all things come into being through God, attention always moves us into greater openness toward God. Weil writes repeatedly that true attention is prayer. She also writes that the image of God in humans consists in our ability to practice (or, to be more precise, the ability to learn to practice) attention. Weil understands attention as fundamental to any response to the world around us—without attention, as we have seen, we are like sleepwalkers. This is why attention is necessary in order to engage with suffering. If we do not begin our responses to suffering in attention and continue to root them in attention as we go on, we will soon be responding to something wholly other than the suffering that actually confronts us.

Suffering is, as Cora Diamond puts it, a “difficulty in reality.” Diamond writes that difficulties in reality are things that shoulder us out of our own lives, and leave us feeling thrown. Neither philosophy nor theology nor ordinary human speech is equipped to respond easily to such difficulties. Many responses to suffering are a form of deflection (a term Diamond borrows from Cavell), which is an attempt to address or
solve a problem in the close vicinity of a difficulty, in a way that misses the difficulty itself. (An example of deflection would be explaining the mechanics of photography to the speaker in the Ted Hughes poem “Six Young Men,” who finds it impossible to reconcile the fact of the men’s presence in the photograph with the fact that they have since died in war.)

Suffering (our own or other people’s) is powerful, frightening, and often overwhelming. When it comes to our own suffering, there is a strong temptation to try to rid ourselves of it by passing it on to others (Weil writes of wanting to hit others in the same place in the head where a migraine is giving her unbearable pain, and sees this impulse as central to many systemic human responses to suffering.). The discipline of attention involves accepting our own suffering rather than attempting to evade our own suffering by passing it on to others through false alliances with what Weil calls “force.” Attempting an alliance with force means assuming one has the means to control the world and its outcomes, including other people. Such alliances are doomed to failure, because the idea of possessing force is so intoxicating that humans are incapable of recognizing how little force they are able to wield, and so inevitably overcommit themselves and are destroyed.

When it comes to the suffering of others, if we want to help them, there is a strong temptation to attempt to “solve” the suffering rather than to sit with it and attend to it. This is especially true if we think we have understood the cause of suffering and
feel that we can remove or solve it in only a few steps. But Weil writes that hesitation (however brief) in the face of suffering is essential, and that doing away with hesitation in our responses to our fellow humans is the equivalent of doing away with our regard for them altogether. This means that actions intended to alleviate suffering cannot be effective unless they begin (and remain grounded) in attention.

One of the effects of suffering (especially the extreme suffering Weil calls malheur, or affliction) is to disfigure the sufferer so much that he is no longer recognizable (even to himself) as a human being, and becomes invisible. Weil writes that attention, which is a form of love, is able to see sufferers even when suffering has made them invisible. Because attention is an exercise of the image of God in human beings, and is a participation in God’s work in the world, it can restore to those whom suffering has reduced to the status of objects a sense of their own human value and dignity. Weil argues that because of the way God entered into suffering in Christ’s incarnation and passion, the nature of suffering has changed: suffering is no longer empty, but is instead a place where we can meet God.

Weil makes a strong connection between attending to our own suffering and attending to the suffering of others when she writes about attention to affliction. Such attention is so difficult as to be humanly impossible, so that any occurrence of attention to affliction is, for Weil, a miraculous act of God. One of the reasons why it is so difficult is that attention to affliction requires that the attender be aware of her own exposure to
affliction, the possibility that she could, at any moment, lose everything she considers most intimately definitive of her human identity, dignity, and value. Such a loss is so terrifying to contemplate that we protect ourselves aggressively against knowing it is possible. One of the ways we protect ourselves is by considering those to whom it has happened as categorically different from us. They are at fault, or are suited, somehow, for affliction, whereas we are not. The social psychology of protecting ourselves from knowing that we too may at any moment be afflicted is key to the loss of human dignity experienced by the afflicted.

While all art makes a claim upon our attention, Kollwitz’s art invites us to see human beings accurately and with compassion. Kollwitz’s two first series of prints (A Weavers’ Revolt and Peasants’ War) show her drawing on many of the strands of modern art that surround her in pursuit of this central goal: to attend to human beings, and to help her viewers learn such attention through her work. The many states of her prints show the scrupulousness of her revisions and the resonance between her artistic process and Weil’s account of attention. In her rigorous revisions and her central focus on human beings, she demonstrates a practice of attention that is compatible with Weil’s philosophical and theological account of attention.

Over the course of Kollwitz’s career, her aim of seeing humans accurately becomes more and more an aim to see those who suffer. On the one hand, Kollwitz turns toward the industrial poor among whom she lived, whose sufferings tend to make
them invisible to others. On the other hand, she turns toward her own suffering, particularly her grief over the death of her son in WWI. In the late series of woodcuts called *War*, and in her bronze sculpture *Mother with Dead Son*, she connects the two. Both the print series and the sculpture serve as an invitation to hesitate in a way that lets us attend to the crushing and disorienting reality of suffering, especially the overpowering suffering of affliction. I have argued that the series *War* shows humans meeting their own exposure to the possibility of affliction, and thus modeling for viewers what is needed in order to attend to affliction. The series shows us both affliction and possible affliction, helping us as viewers to place ourselves with the afflicted, to know they are fundamentally like us. This prepares us to go out and see those who are afflicted when we encounter them in our own lives. I argue that Kollwitz’s self-described calling “to voice the sufferings of people” fits into a theological account of lament, which presents human suffering in the context of God’s hearing and care.

**Theological Premises**

The claim that attention is necessary to any genuine engagement with suffering rests on several theological premises about who God is, how God creates, and who and what human beings are. Here I draw significantly on Weil’s theology. God is love, and God made the world in an act of self-giving generosity. When the good creation became devastated by sin, God extended this generosity in Christ’s incarnation and passion by joining human beings in their most unbearable and disfiguring suffering. Human
attention to suffering, and even to affliction, is possible both because Christ inhabited
affliction fully, and because he was raised from the dead. In Christ, God transformed
suffering so that it is no longer empty, but is instead a place where humans can meet
God. The experience of suffering, however, continues often to be an experience of the
absence of God—though God is present, this presence may not be a felt reality for
sufferers.

Humans are made in the image of God and are therefore made to love in a way
that is an extension of God’s love and shares the character of that love. This means that
we are meant to relate to our own selves in the way God relates to God’s self: by giving
ourselves away rather than by attempting to control our surroundings in order to avoid
all suffering. We are most ourselves in responding to our own legitimate suffering when
we accept that suffering rather than attempting to escape it through alliances with force
that try to pass our suffering on to others. We are most ourselves in responding to the
suffering of others when we meet that suffering with hesitation as a difficulty in reality,
and attend to it without assuming that we understand it or that we will be able to
alleviate it. We are also most effective in working to alleviate suffering when our basic
response is attention. All effective human action, including action to alleviate suffering,
grows out of attention, and is impossible without it.

As humans, we control very little. We may exercise some power to reorganize
our lives so as to escape suffering, but we are not able to escape as much of it as we
think we can. Attention is key both as a way of distinguishing avoidable from
unavoidable suffering, and as a way of doing the work of unavoidable (or legitimate)
suffering. Doing the work of our own suffering means that we do not multiply suffering
(our own and that of those around us) by the way we suffer. Attention is made possible
by the work of God in us, and opens us to the possibility of meeting God. Whether it is
done with the aim of meeting God or not, Weilian attention is a surrender to things as
they are, which is ultimately a surrender to God. This is especially true in the case of
attention to affliction. As I noted above, Weil sees such attention as humanly impossible,
and as a miraculous act of God. God enables us to attend to affliction (by recognizing the
possibility of our own affliction) because God has inhabited not only the possibility of
affliction but the reality of it, in Christ. Affliction is thus the most unexpected place in all
the world where we can meet God.

As an artist Kollwitz has no developed theology of affliction, and yet her work
links God’s presence to a human ability to attend to suffering. I have argued that the
woodcut series War shows humans meeting their own exposure to the possibility of
affliction. Moreover, Kollwitz’s depictions of suffering often include references to the
crucifixion. Her self-described calling “to voice the sufferings of people” recalls the
biblical and theological category of lament: her art presents human suffering in the
context of God’s hearing and care. Her visceral, visual portrayals of deep suffering
convey affliction in a way Weil’s philosophical prose does not. This means that they give
us an entry point into Weilian attention that is harmonious with Weil’s writing, but goes beyond what that writing itself can offer us.

**Contributions to Theological Aesthetics**

**Generally Commendable Practices of Perception**

At the beginning of *Art Rethought*, Nicholas Wolterstorff uses material from two essays by the literary historian M. H. Abrams in order to make a point about the history of aesthetic philosophy.¹ Early writing on aesthetics tended to focus on, or at least include, technical instruction to artists on how to do their work well (take for example Aristotle’s *Poetics*). Abrams calls this the “construction” model. Since technical instruction for poetry would not straightforwardly apply to dance or visual art, such writing tended to focus on one kind of artmaking (often it was, as for Aristotle, poetry: see for example Sidney’s “Apology for Poetry” or Baumgarten’s *Meditations*).² Then, “early in the eighteenth century, the emphasis in writings on the arts shifted from the artist who makes the work to the public who engage it.”³ This was part of a sudden shift toward a “contemplation” model of engaging art. The centrality for 18th-century British aesthetics of the concept of *taste* is a case in point: the question “what is good taste?” is

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² Sidney’s essay was written in 1579 and published posthumously in 1595; the full title of Baumgarten’s book, published in 1735, is *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (“Philosophical meditations pertaining to some matters concerning poetry”).

one that was urgent less for creators of artworks than for the growing English middle-class public that provided the audience for artworks, and that wanted to feel confident of its own cultural education and sophistication.

Wolterstorff uses this summary as the beginning of his detailed explication of what he calls the “grand narrative,” a historical theory that shows how the cultural developments that led to the 18th-century split between fine art and craft, and to the rise of museums, also led to what we might call a hegemony of disinterested contemplation as the singular and only legitimate mode of engaging with “real,” or fine, art. The exclusive emphasis on contemplation, Wolterstorff argues, is only recently beginning to crumble. He criticizes the grand narrative for leading to a modern art world that was incapable of appreciating or understanding things like hymns, household crockery, work songs, or even social protest art. All of these have a purpose other than (or at the very least in addition to) disinterested contemplation, and therefore fall outside the model of what the grand narrative recognizes as art. Kollwitz (who, we have seen, said herself that her art was not “pure” art but that she was content that it have a purpose) gets her own chapter in Wolterstorff’s book, in the section on social protest art.

Having brought up the grand narrative (an account I find enormously compelling), it is worthwhile to distinguish Weilian attention from Kantian disinterested

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4 Wolterstorff spends the first five chapters of Art Rethought on describing the grand narrative and giving historical evidence for it. He gives a shorter overview of the grand narrative in his essay “Art and the Aesthetic: The Religious Dimension.”
contemplation as Wolterstorff describes it in the context of museum art. Contemplation, considered as the correct way of engaging a work of art, is something that requires leisure time. Weilian attention, by contrast, is something that can be practiced in the midst of manual labor (as she herself repeatedly did). Weil draws on Kant, and she would consider attention disinterested, because attention is about resisting our self-comforting illusions and learning to see in a way that moves beyond references to our particular concerns. But her account of attention is too inseparably bound up with action to fit Wolterstorff’s description. Disinterested contemplation as it appears in a museum or concert hall is part of what Weil means by attention, but only a small part. Remember, for example, her emphasis on failure and boredom in her advice to students on how to use school studies as a training-ground for the attention. Attention to a suffering human being in particular is far more costly than looking at a painting in a museum, and requires far more active an engagement and a generosity on the part of the attender. As Weil writes elsewhere, attention gives way directly to action: if I genuinely see you are hungry and I can feed you, I will.

Then why connect a visual artist to Weil’s account of attention to suffering? Because I see Kollwitz’s art as asking for a Weilian quality of attention from its viewers. Kollwitz made her art to be shown in museums and galleries, but also to be glued to outdoor walls as posters. The setting of Mother with Dead Son (fig. 5) as a memorial in the
Neue Wache (fig. 6) gives her work an appropriate social function, one that is in keeping with Kollwitz’s own explicit aims as an artist.

My project thus returns in its aims to early instructive writing on aesthetics, though it does not fit exactly either into what Abrams calls constructive writing (because it is not technical instruction to artists) nor into the tradition of instruction to a general public on how properly to engage an artwork (because my ultimate aim is not to teach people to see art well). I do not provide guidelines to visual artists on how to craft works that help to train their viewers’ attention, or help their viewers develop the capacity to attend to suffering of even affliction. Neither do I propose Weil’s account of attention as a means of doing a good job looking at Kollwitz’s art. Instead, I offer an account of Weilian attention, and propose that is the only meaningful way of engaging suffering.

Then I offer a description of the ways in which I see Kollwitz’s work both exemplifying such attention, and helping viewers to learn it. I propose Kollwitz’s art as a means of more deeply understanding Weil’s account of attention and why it is essential to a meaningful engagement with suffering, or indeed with any aspect of what there is. I also propose Kollwitz’s art as a way of beginning to learn, and to practice, Weilian attention, in a way that will help viewers to become more capable of attending to suffering and even to affliction when they meet it in themselves and in others.

What I propose here is a generally commendable practice of training our perception, a learnable discipline that affects how we relate to God, to ourselves, to each
other, and to the created world. I hope that artists will find it useful; I believe it is centrally relevant to them. But I believe it is also centrally relevant to every other human being, and in the same way.

For artists, it fits under what Maritain describes as purifying the sources of creativity. Maritain writes that there are practical virtues (skill at one’s craft, for example) that influence the quality of an artist’s work. But there are also “upstream” virtues, which do not have to do with the technicalities of making the art, with one’s skill with words or a pencil or fluid movement or the piano. These upstream virtues are the same for artists and non-artists, and ultimately they all derive from love. Whether an artist treats her family well does not affect her technical skill. But her treatment of her family arises from the same love that also shapes the springs of her creativity. If she is selfish and unable to see others except as means of meeting her own needs or accomplishing her own goals, this selfishness will shape what she is able to see and make in her artwork. Maritain argues that the purer the springs of her creativity (that is, the more developed her love), the deeper the potential power of her artistic inspiration.5

5 He makes this argument in more than one place. One version, from Art and Scholasticism, is intended particularly for the Christian artist. Maritain sees the artist’s Christianity as separate from her artmaking in the sense that she ought not to set out to make “Christian” art. Instead, she ought to set out to be as good a Christian as she can, and to make as good of art as she can. Her Christianity, which is upstream of her artmaking, will fill that artmaking without her needing to make a deliberate effort to connect them:

“If you want to make a Christian work, then be Christian, and simply try to make a beautiful work, into which your heart will pass; do not try to ‘make Christian’.
An Alternative to Theodicy

Weil writes about suffering and the goodness of God, and the outworkings of these two in human life. These are the classic elements of theodicy, which tries to reconcile the goodness and justice of God with human suffering. I see Weil’s theology of attention to suffering, and Kollwitz’s practice of attention to suffering, as an alternative to theodicy. An attentive response to suffering that is based on the theological premises I have outlined does not attempt to explain how God can be good in spite of the horrors of human suffering. Instead, such a response accepts that suffering, including horrible
suffering, is present in the world, and that nonetheless God is good. These two truths about the world meet in Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Even Christ’s life, however, is not an explanation of God’s goodness in the face of suffering. Instead, it is God’s presence in the worst kind of suffering.

I find Weil’s account of attention to suffering, and Kollwitz’s art, hopeful because of the way they respond to suffering. Instead of spending their energy asking why it is there, they accept that it is there and put their energy into finding out how we might respond to its presence. If we begin with an attentive acceptance, we can meet our own suffering in a way that does not multiply it by passing it on directly to others. We are also able to meet the suffering of others in a way that preserves our sense (and possibly their sense) of their human dignity. In this act of attention alone, we may significantly help alleviate the severity of their suffering.

In her Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering, Eleanor Stump asks whether the Bible gives us a theodicy, and looks in the book of Job. She makes a distinction between first-person statements, third-person statements, and second-person statements. Second-person statements, Stump points out, always imply a relationship not implied by either first- or third-person statements. If there is a theodicy in Job, Stump argues, then it is a second-person theodicy. Suffering, she writes, admits only of second-person answers, such as the one God in fact gave Job: “Here I am. You’ve been talking to me. Do you know who I am? Look.” The power of this answer to suffering is
not conceptual; it isn’t an answer that can be straightforwardly transferred into other contexts. From without, it seems conceptually irrelevant (who cares about ostriches?). God doesn’t give Job an answer in that sense at all. God does not justify or even explain what has happened. Instead, God addresses Job.

There is no conceptual answer. The book of Job points this out in the ironic, profound inadequacy of its postscript considered as an undoing of suffering (“then Job got everything back, including better kids”). There is no way back before the suffering, no way to undo it. There is only a way forward, with God. But in ways we can’t understand in the third person, this was enough for Job. And it can be enough for each of us too, when we encounter God ourselves. This is the only viable way I know of thinking about theodicy.

The word Weil uses in French is spelled just like the English attention, but can be translated either as “attention” or as “waiting.” “J’attends” can thus mean either I pay attention or I wait.6 In English the second French meaning is preserved in the idea of “attendants.” Weil disliked the idea of human “searching” for God because she thought it inaccurate: it is God who searches for us. Humans, instead, ought to cultivate waiting for God—that is, attention. I see the kind of attention to suffering that I have been proposing as a hopeful practice because it waits for God’s second-person address, for

6 Thanks to Bo Helmich for reminding me of this fact.
the only encounter that can tell each of us what our suffering is for, and how God is with us, in our particular lives.

Because Kollwitz’s work is visual, it goes even further than Weil’s does in avoiding a theodicy. The question of theodicy does not even come up in her medium in the way that it does in written theology. Instead, there is an immediacy in her images of suffering that invites us into attention. This visual immediacy sidesteps some of the ways in which we tend to deflect and avoid attention when we are faced with suffering. Attending to the human beings portrayed in Kollwitz’s images is not the same thing as attending to suffering human beings; but it is a training ground that prepares us to attend to human beings in our own lives.
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Biography

Stephanie Gehring was born on July 22nd, 1980, in Giessen, Germany. She attended St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and earned a B.A. in studio art and English in 2002. She attended Cornell University and earned an M.F.A. in poetry in 2005. She attended Duke Divinity School and earned an M.T. S. in 2012.

She has published one paper, “‘After the Will: Attention and Selfhood in Weil,’” in Self or No-Self?, Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, and has another forthcoming in Religion & Literature: “Attention, Avoidance, and Tragedy: What Simone Weil Could Have Said About King Lear if She Had Read Stanley Cavell.”

At Cornell, she was awarded an Assignment Sequence Prize (2007) and Certificate of Excellence in Teaching (2008) through the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines. She won the Corson-Browning Poetry Prize and the Goethe Prize (Cornell German Studies), for a poem sequence on Käthe Kollwitz, both in 2007. At Duke Divinity School she was awarded the Ray C. Petry Scholarship (2010-12). During her doctoral studies she was awarded the J. B. Duke Scholarship by Duke’s Graduate School (2012-2016) and is a member of the Society of Duke Fellows. She won a Summer Research Fellowship and International Dissertation Research Travel Award through the Graduate School (2015) and two Kearns Fellowships (2016 and 2017) through the Religious Studies Department.