

# ATTENTIVE LISTENING AND CARE IN A NEOLIBERAL ERA: WEILIAN INSIGHTS FOR HURRIED TIMES

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## ABSTRACT

Placing feminist care ethicists in conversation with contemporary democratic theorists like Iris Marion Young and Benjamin Barber, this paper proposes a philosophical defense of the centrality of listening for social justice. In the first parts of the paper, I indicate that attentive listening ought to be understood as an embodied act that requires corporeal presence and as a difficult intersubjective practice that is decisive for recognition. I then consider some of the concrete implications this theoretical account of embodied listening has for our professional and political practices. I call readers' attention to the obstacles listening encounters today in institutional settings characterized by time constraints and by technological imperatives towards speed, physical distance and distraction (the case of neoliberal universities is invoked here to illustrate some of my claims). In pursuing these aims, I rely on the work of Simone Weil (1909-1943), who offered one of the most complex accounts of attention in modern philosophy—an account that has been crucial for care theorists. I suggest that Weil is a particularly useful intellectual resource because she offers us an insightful theory of attentive listening with a series of practical political and organizational proposals. Indeed, Weil correctly saw that attentive listening requires a reflexive and *controlled* relationship to technology and to time—two neglected insights that contemporary political theorists ought to revisit.

## KEYWORDS

Care ethics, listening, democratic theory, attention, Simone Weil.

“In a temporality of speed... there is no time for wonder or generosity, no time to attend to the enchantment of daily life and no time to extend to ourselves or others a sense of worth which an investment of time can signify.”

Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 49.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police released a report that claimed that close to 1,200 indigenous women had been murdered or gone missing in the last three decades in Canada<sup>2</sup>. The victims ranged from young children to middle-aged women—some were sex workers; others homeless; the majority were poor. The violence, drug abuse and poverty faced by many of these women are the legacy of Canada's residential schools system<sup>3</sup>. But in February 2016, Canadians learned that the number of victims announced earlier was incorrect—that it is possible that as many as 4,000 aboriginal women are missing or dead<sup>4</sup>. What is shocking about this is not only the high figure and the fact that the police could be so uncertain about its numbers; it is also the fact that the government, the police and the public had been told numerous times about the vulnerability of aboriginal women across the country and did so little about it.

This is a tragic case of failure to care, to listen. It is, no doubt, a failure in many things, but the aspect that concerns me here is the failure that this case represents in terms of listening. From the 1990s onwards, alarms were raised, many women spoke up, protests took place, but nobody listened. What it took for some to listen was the gruesome trial of Robert Pickton—who raped and killed dozens of aboriginal women on his farm. As the trial took place, activists reiterated their call for a national inquiry—which was finally launched in December 2015 (close to ten years after Pickton). Undoubtedly, countless terrible stories will be told during this inquiry. Those who have lost a daughter or a mother and who faced the indifference and hostility of the police will have few kind words to utter. The difficulty of listening will be substantive for all Canadians (who wants to feel responsible? who wants to listen to angry recriminations about our colonial past and present?). But listening is precisely what many want. As one distressed mother emphasized in an interview, "All we want as mothers is someone to listen to us, someone who will agree with us

2 Royal Canadian Mounted Police, *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview*,

<<http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/missing-and-murdered-aboriginal-women-national-operational-overview>>

3 Amnesty International, *Stolen Sisters*, 2004:

<<https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/amnesty/files/amr200032004enstolensisters.pdf>>

4 J. Paul, "Confusion reigns over number of missing, murdered indigenous women", *CBCnews*, Feb. 16, 2016: <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/mmiw-4000-hajdu-1.3450237>>.

that our children matter”<sup>5</sup>. (Obviously this woman wants listening for more than therapeutic reasons. We should all be skeptical of mere ‘listening cures’: listening has to be seen as part of a wider socio-political transformative process.) For far too long now, Canadian officials and well-meaning experts thought they knew best the needs of aboriginal people and believed that they could speak on behalf of these ‘voiceless’ individuals. But aboriginal activist Laura Holland insisted, “we HAVE voice – you NEED to listen”<sup>6</sup> (the capital letters are hers).

Holland is addressing an important and little-understood dimension of social justice: listening. For Holland, it is not that the marginal or the less powerful should speak up, obtain a ‘voice’—aboriginal women *already have a voice*. Rather, the onus is on the powerful to attend to it. What I wish to argue in this paper is that Holland’s view of what social justice requires is remarkably similar to the view articulated by care theorists. Some<sup>7</sup> of them have, indeed, proposed a vision of ethico-political life that speaks to Holland’s invitation: what they have proposed, effectively, is to move from a politics of voice to a *politics of attentive listening*. The latter poses an original and radical challenge to a Western political tradition that has rarely acknowledged listening’s importance. Ever since Antiquity, most philosophers have argued that the mark of good citizenship and freedom is *logos*—the exercise of rational speech, the having of a clear and loud voice in debates. If at all mentioned by philosophers, silent listening was generally regarded as the mark of slaves, fools, or women (recall Aristotle’s “silence is a woman’s glory”). In Ancient Greece, nobody sought to be noticed for his listening skills. As Silvia Montiglio observes: “like the Homeric hero, the ideal citizen of Athens boasted to excel at deeds and at words, but not at silence. *Not even as a listener*”<sup>8</sup>. It is this same vision of citizenship—this same Periclean hero who speaks vociferously more than listens—that has trickled down from antiquity to modern political thought, finding one of its most well-known expression in Hannah Arendt.

Now, what is surprising is that care theory has rarely been invoked by those rare but important political theorists who have sought to theorize listening (e.g. Benjamin Barber, Iris Marion Young, Susan Bickford, Andrew Dobson). We thus have two bodies of literature that have reflected on listening but that have, on the

5 E. Turner, “On the front lines of the missing and murdered women tragedy, pain never fades”, *Winnipeg Free Press*, Nov. 17, 2012: <<http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/fyi/the-hurting-179777201.html>>.

6 *Honouring Indigenous Women*, Heart of Nations vol.1 (2011).

7 See especially the work of Sandra Laugier, Fiona Robinson, Maurice Hamington.

8 S. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, Princeton U. Press, Princeton, 2000, 291; my italics.

whole, led parallel lives so far. In this paper, I orchestrate a conversation between them in order to propose a philosophical defense of the centrality of listening for social justice. My paper has three general aims. The first is to convince the champions of care theory that what is at the heart of their ideal is listening. The second is to outline the nature and importance of attentive listening and to flag a number of complex philosophical issues this account raises. I argue that listening is an embodied act that requires corporeal presence, and that it is a difficult, intersubjective practice that is crucial for social justice. Thirdly, I wish to consider a few of the concrete, material implications this theoretical account of listening has for our political and professional practices. In particular, my account of listening calls for special attention to the obstacles it encounters in institutional settings characterized by constraints of time and by technological imperatives towards speed, distance and distraction.

In pursuing this project I will rely on Simone Weil (1909-1943), who offered one of the most complex accounts of attention in modern philosophy—an account that has been quite important for care theorists and their views on listening. Philosophy teacher, labour activist, anti-fascist militant and religious thinker, Weil penned a variety of texts on Greek philosophy, oppression, factory work, colonialism and—most importantly for us—attention, which she regarded as a vital faculty for truth-seeking and justice<sup>9</sup>. Weil believed that the attending skills developed through school studies or manual work were skills that could later transfer to our ethico-political lives. In her well-known essay on school studies she described the faculty of attention in the following way: “Attention consists in suspending one’s thought, leaving it available... thought must be empty, waiting, not looking, but always be ready to receive”<sup>10</sup>. As we will see, it is this very definition of attention that has found its way into numerous accounts of care ethics. But even though Weil has often been appealed to as an authority on the subject of attentiveness, most scholars have shied away from attending fully to her thought—either because they have seen in it excessive self-abnegation, or because they have neglected her more concrete writings on technology and politics. I argue that Weil is a useful intellectual resource for us precisely because she combines an insightful theory of attentive listening with a series of practical political and organizational proposals. As we will see in the last part of the paper, Weil correctly noted that attentive listening requires a reflexive and *controlled* relationship to technology and time. These are two neglected Weilian insights that I encourage care and democratic theorists to turn to. In arguing for the importance of these insights I will briefly invoke the case of universities—sites of care and citizenship heavily targeted by neoliberalism.

9 More below, but for now see S. Weil, *Oeuvres Complètes* (hereafter OC), Paris, Gallimard, VI:2, p. 380. Also *Ecrits de Londres*, Paris, Gallimard, 1956 (hereafter EL), p. 187.

10 S. Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, Paris, LaColombe, 1950 (hereafter AD), p. 93. Unless otherwise stated, all English translations of Weil are mine.

## 2. PRELUDE: CARE ETHICS AND LISTENING TO NEEDS

Before fleshing out my account of attentive listening, I wish to say a few words about the way the term ‘attentiveness’ has been discussed in care theory in the last decades, for this will help clarify why I think that at the heart of these discussions is the issue of listening. In Sara Ruddick’s 1980 paper “Maternal thinking” we find, as far as I know, the first discussion of the importance of attentiveness in caring practices. There Ruddick argued that good caring was highly dependant on the ethical skill of ‘attentive love’—which she described as at once a cognitive capacity and an emotional bond<sup>11</sup>. Quite significantly for our purposes, Ruddick cited Simone Weil as a key authority on the subject<sup>12</sup>. That Weil’s work was important to Ruddick and would remain central to almost all discussions of attentiveness in care ethics in the next decades is hardly surprising: Weil is the only 20th century philosopher for whom attention was an absolutely central concept.

But it is undoubtedly with Joan Tronto’s *Moral Boundaries* that the ethical skill of attentiveness (and its association with Weil) took on greater visibility and became standard fixtures in care ethics discussions. For Tronto, attentiveness is an other-directed moral skill, a hyper-receptivity that is most critical for the first step of the caring process—‘caring about’—when a care-giver recognizes in another being needs to be addressed<sup>13</sup>. However, like other theorists after her, Tronto was not fully convinced by Weil’s account—particularly by the (improbable) emptying of the mind it seemed to call for. Several care theorists have followed in Tronto’s footsteps and proposed a similar reading of Weilian attention and of its importance (and limitations). For Nel Noddings as much as Tronto, attentiveness is essential to avoid the problem of paternalism—or stated differently, to “move away from assumed needs to *expressed* needs”<sup>14</sup>. To attend, in other words, means to be receptive to what the care-receiver herself thinks is required in a particular situation; this requires listening attentively to what this person has to say. Explicitly building on Tronto’s anthropology of needs, Sandra Laugier has explicitly described the subject of

11 Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking”, *Feminist Studies*, 6, 2 (1980), pp. 357-58.

12 She appealed to Iris Murdoch as well, but note that the latter’s account is heavily indebted to Weil. For a thoughtful discussion of the differences between Weil and Murdoch, see Peta Bowden, “Ethical attention: Accumulating Understandings”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6, 1 (1998), pp. 59-77. See also Francesca Cattaneo, “La nostra verità: immaginazione ed esperienza della realtà nella filosofia di Iris Murdoch”, *Etica & Politica*, XVI, 2014, especially pp. 244-245.

13 J. C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, Routledge, New York, 1993, pp. 127-128.

14 N. Noddings, “Care ethics and ‘caring’ organisations”, in M. Hamington and D. Engster (ed. by), *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, OUP, Oxford, 2015, p. 77.

care as ‘an attentive subject’. And quite significantly for our purposes here, Laugier proposed to define care itself as a matter of attentive listening: “non seulement certains de nos besoins [...] appellent directement le care, mais le care définit l’espace (politique) où *l’écoute des besoins devient possible en tant qu’attention véritable à autrui*”<sup>15</sup>. For Luigina Mortari as well, “l’attenzione implica innanzitutto capacità di ascolto”<sup>16</sup>. It is thus not entirely surprising that Yves Citton could recently claim that the essence of care ethics is attentiveness, understood as joint attentive listening to what preoccupies others<sup>17</sup>.

What Laugier, Mortari and Citton’s words indicate is that it is legitimate for us to move quite freely between the concepts of ‘attentiveness’ and ‘listening’. But if attentiveness and listening are quite comparable things, why insist on using the seemingly redundant expression ‘*attentive* listening’? I wish to use both terms partially in order to highlight that there are different types (or qualities) of listening. One could think, for instance, of the qualitative difference between attentive/deep and distracted/hyper listening<sup>18</sup>—a distinction that becomes particularly relevant when we consider the impact of technological distractions in workplaces and classrooms. Now, I do not claim that distracted listening has absolutely no value in caring encounters; in fact, distracted listening may be desirable at times (for instance, when things simply overwhelm us), and it is, besides, inevitable. Indeed, our capacity to listen in a sustained way for long is limited. As such, one could claim that distracted listening is the norm, and that attentive listening is the *exception*. But even if it is limited by our all-too-human bodies, by noise, time pressures and distractions (or perhaps *precisely because it is limited*), attentive listening is crucial to our ethico-political lives. In the next sections, I will explain why that is.

### 3. LISTENING AS AN EMBODIED ACT: THE IMPORTANCE AND DANGERS OF CORPOREAL PRESENCE

As we can easily gather from our quotidian usage, the term ‘listening’ can be used to mean several things—some more metaphorical than others. We are familiar, for instance, with the view that one can ‘listen’ to the voice of ancestors by reading their accounts in history books—or with the idea that political representatives can ‘listen’ to their constituents by reading their angry letters.

15 P. Molinier et al., *Qu’est-ce que le care ? Souci des autres, sensibilité, responsabilité*, Payot, Paris, 2009, p. 198. My italics.

16 L. Mortari, *La pratica dell’aver cura*, Pearson, Milano, 2006, p. 74; also pp. 125-126.

17 Y. Citton, *Pour une écologie de l’attention*, Seuil, Paris, 2014, pp. 166-167.

18 E.g. K. Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention”, *Profession*, 13, 2007, pp. 187-199.

While these more figurative usages of the term are pertinent for the politics of listening defended by care theory and some democratic theorists, what I wish to do in this section is to underscore the unique value of corporeal presence for attentive listening. I argue that attentive listening ought to be seen as an embodied act and that physical presence when listening adds a layer of complexity to the act that reading a letter or a book cannot replicate.

But corporeal presence is not without its dangers. The move towards abstract universalism on the part of moral theorists is largely an attempt to get beyond the apparently inessential, accidental or contingent elements of our corporeal selves. Such theorists rightly wish to escape the distractions and oppressive possibilities raised by the numerous prejudices we bring to our corporeal encounters. When a high-status person speaks, we are socially primed to take his (it is usually 'his') utterances seriously, just as we are often full of prejudices that cause us to discount or ignore the socially-marginalized. The aboriginal women with whom we began have decades of experience of being ignored in part because of their physical presentation. But the move to abstract universality has the effect of muting or silencing much that is important (as generations of philosophical criticism of abstract universalism have made clear). Attentive listening as an act of corporeal presence, I argue, is more difficult and more dangerous than examining an abstract theory or statement, but it is also *socially and politically essential*. It is precisely because of the dangers it involves that attentive listening is of great importance, and that the skill of attentive listening is so essential to citizens, political actors, and people in roles of authority (as Weil so powerfully argued).

My claim that attentive listening is something embodied will not strike the reader familiar with care ethics as odd. In 2001, Hamington explicitly insisted on the embodied nature of listening in his work on the civic engagement of Jane Addams, for whom face-to-face encounters mattered tremendously. He wrote: "Much of what is communicated between people is found in the subtleties of facial expressions, hand gestures, posture, inflection, and eye contact. When one is actively attending to someone else's communication in person, these subtleties can be absorbed [...] through the body"<sup>19</sup>. That caring attentiveness requires physical presence is also a claim that has been defended by Andries Baart and Klaartje Klaver in their work on a presence-oriented approach (which emphasizes the importance of an attunement to care receivers' language, bodily cues and "work rhythms")<sup>20</sup>.

19 M. Hamington, "Jane Adams and a Politics of Embodied Care", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 15, 2(2001), pp. 111-112.

20 A. Baart & C. Klaver, "Attentiveness in care", *Nursing Ethics*, 18, 5, 2011, p. 687.

Now, let us look a bit closer at the claim that “listening is an embodied act”, since as we will see, there are significant material and political implications that flow from this (seemingly banal) affirmation. By suggesting that listening is an embodied act I wish to underscore, first, that attentive listening involves bodily sensibility; it will, most typically, involve both the ear *and* the eye. This is not to suggest that deaf or blind people are incapable of listening; whichever organs of sensory input are present must be attuned to the physical being with which one is communicating. One might even go so far as to assert that the lack of a given sensory organ in fact *raises the importance of corporeal presence*—Helen Keller would have been entirely uncommunicative without bodily presence; as it was, she was a model listener. By focusing on the information transmitted by ear and eye I am not privileging the sighted or those with healthy ears; rather I am drawing our attention to the manner in which corporeal presence gives us access to the whole human being before us, in all her strength, vulnerability, and particularity.

This entails a type of focus. For the aural listener, the sensory information is, of course, sound—but, as countless writers have underscored, it entails more than mere stimulus of the auditory nerve. One could, for instance, perceive the sounds of children crying or cars zipping on a nearby highway, and not necessarily attend to them. For there to be something called ‘listening’, an individual has to focus; there has to be an active effort made by the perceiver to go ‘beyond’ mere receptivity. This focusing is critical to most accounts of attention and listening (many scholars invoke William James’ famous line that attention is “focalization, concentration of consciousness”<sup>21</sup>). With James, Weil insisted that the true type of attention required focus—or as she puts it, it has to be directed (*dirigée*)<sup>22</sup>.

Now, what might be slightly less intuitive (but was of utmost importance for Weil) is that good listening requires paying attention with our eyes—attending to non-verbal bodily cues, facial expressions, posture. Most experienced nurses, social workers and teachers know that a trembling lip, bent shoulders or a puzzled frown can sometimes communicate much more information about a person than words. In her sizable review of scholarship pertaining to listening in the fields of education, nursing, business and medicine, Sheila Shipley emphasizes that one of the chief attributes of listening that comes up most often across scientific fields is the attending to nonverbal, physical cues<sup>23</sup>. But there

21 W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, G. Miller ed., Dover, New York, 1890/1950, p. 403. But there are important differences in their accounts of the will’s relationship to attention (which I cannot consider here due to space limitations).

22 Weil, OC I, ‘Appendice I, p. 389.

23 S. D. Shipley, “Listening: A Concept Analysis”, *Nursing Forum*, 45, 2 (2010), pp. 125-134.



is yet another sense in which listening ought to be described as an embodied act that concerns the sense of vision: a competent listener will know that the way *her own body* is looked at *by the speaker* greatly matters<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, an attentive listener will do her utmost to project attentive body ‘signals’—appropriate facial expression; nodding; meaningful eye contact; a type of inquisitive, receptive posture that indicates that she is paying attention. (One would be hard pressed to propose a universal, detailed account of what this body language entails. After all, great cultural variations exist regarding what constitutes, say, appropriate eye contact or whether touching the shoulder of a distressed patient is a meaningful and legitimate indication of listening in health-care settings.)

If most people would easily acknowledge the value of projecting a ‘listening body’ in a school or hospital setting, what I want to argue now is that the same type of attunement to others’ bodies matters very much in socio-political encounters as well—as Iris Marion Young has underscored. In *Intersecting Voices* and *Inclusion and Democracy*, Young calls attention to the informal and insidious ways in which the exclusion of certain groups takes place in civic debates. She argues that in order to craft more inclusive democracies, we must care more about the small things individuals do to indicate their respect or concern for others. One of these is what Young refers to as ‘greeting’—which she understands as a public acknowledgement of the other via a simple ‘how do you do?’, a gaze, a smile, a handshake (for Young, it is clear that “bodies, and care for bodies, must enter an ideal of communicative theory”)<sup>25</sup>. We would be wrong, she insists, to ignore the meaningfulness of these seemingly small bodily gestures. Even if some of these deeds are slightly formalized or even a bit insincere, they have a crucial role to play in the public discussion that may follow: “By such gestures of greeting, discussion participants acknowledge that they are together with those they name, and that *they are obliged to listen* to their opinions and take them seriously. As a political issue of inclusion, recognition is primarily a starting-point for political interaction and contest, rather than its end”<sup>26</sup>. We will come back below to the issue of recognition (which is, as we can gather here, identified as the ‘substance’ of these acts of attending). But for now, let us heed Young’s invitation to take se-

24 See also L. Mortari, for whom “l’ascolto è una forma di cura” (*La pratica dell’aver cura*, cit., p. 86).

25 I. Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997, p. 70. Also J. Heier, “Disabling Constraints on Democratic Participation”, *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 9, 2, 2015, pp. 201-208.

26 I. Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford, OUP, Oxford, 2000, p. 61; my italics.

riously bodily ‘care-taking’ and consider more closely the idea that listening is improved by presence.

To claim that *real corporeal presence matters for listening* is crucial because, as noted above, the term “listening” is sometimes employed in a vacuous manner (say, by governments that replace civil servants with interactive websites that are said to “truly listen”), or in a more figurative manner by philosophers. Robert Goodin, for instance, has stressed the importance of listening to dissimilar others by way of a travelling of our imagination—through films, plays or novels. Goodin has argued that in large nation-states, democratic conversations will inevitably entail much more ‘empathetic imaginings’ (silent listening in our own heads) than real dialogue with fellow citizens.<sup>27</sup> My point here is not to deny the value of reading novels or of ‘imaginative listening’. But I insist on listening’s concrete/material dimension partially because I wish to underscore the substantive difference (and *added difficulty*) that embodied listening represents. Reading, in the comfort of one’s bed, a novel about the life of an alcoholic homeless man who reeks of vomit is quite different from actually listening to his story, standing two feet away from him on a street, in a cold winter night. In all likelihood, the smell of vomit (and the cold) will impede our listening and affect our moral judgement. The founts of prejudices are located both in our bodies and our heads. His lack of articulacy might also get in the way of listening: novels have a coherence that few all-too-human encounters have. To insist that corporeal presence matters, then, is to insist at once on the relative easiness and the *limits*—the thinner moral and political texture—of travelling solely with ‘our heads’. As I will further argue below, I think that real, physical confrontation with difference or with suffering adds a layer of complexity that a hundred novels might not capture.

Now, I have chosen the somewhat dramatic case of the homeless alcoholic also in order to argue that we ought not to theorize listening chiefly on the basis of the most quotidian, comfortable experiences of listening (say, to our depressed friends or irate children). We ought, rather, begin with situations of dissimilarity, of encounters with substantive cultural/class/gender/racial difference—encounters that can trigger wonder and curiosity, but also (and more likely) indifference, incomprehension, discomfort and even disgust. It is in these tough cases that social justice and recognition rests so much on listening. And it is also in these tough cases where listening is most difficult and presence most problematic—as Weil has emphasized in her (proto-Bourdieuian) account of the interactions between a judge and an underprivileged convict in

27 R. Goodin, “Democratic Deliberation within”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 29, 1 (2000), p. 83.

court. Hers is an account that underscores the impact that marked differences in linguistic/cultural capital can have on listening.

In order to better understand affliction, Weil spent a fair amount of time attending court-proceedings—an experience that shaped her views of the penal system. She noted, for instance, that “nothing was more frightful” than to see a penniless convict having to defend himself in court but who remains tongue-tied in front of a judge<sup>28</sup>. The offender, Weil explains, stammers because of his low social origins and because of the disempowering effect of judges “who do not listen” and constantly interrupt with sophisticated witticisms<sup>29</sup>. What justice requires in her view is for judges to know when and how to *remain silent and listen*—which also entails knowing how to adjust their demeanor and idiom to others. Indeed, it requires judges to address others *as equals*, even if they are not: “justice consists, if one is a superior in an unequal power relationship, to conduct oneself as if there is equality—exactly, in all manners, *including the smallest details of accent and attitude*”<sup>30</sup>. Note the power in the judge’s hands here: he can decide to adjust—*or not*—his speech and manners. He can choose *not to listen*. Weil rightly saw that a seemingly innocent refusal to listen can, *in itself*, constitute oppression, and that being listened to can be profoundly empowering.

#### 4. ATTENTIVE LISTENING, RELATIONALITY AND VULNERABILITY

In the previous section, I emphasized that listening is best done when there is *corporeal* presence. I also claimed that it ought to be seen as a deliberate *act*, which constitutes an important reminder in light of the oft-heard claim that listening is a chiefly *passive* phenomenon. In the next section, I would like to propose that attentive listening be regarded as a deeply relational and intersubjective practice—one that is much more than a mere transmission of information from one individual to another. To say that it is relational partially entails saying that a speech means little in the absence of listeners—a claim repeatedly underscored by Carol Gilligan. “Speaking depends upon listening and being listened to”, she writes, “speaking is a deeply relational act”<sup>31</sup>. We can obviously see an intimate connection between the claim that listening is

28 Weil, EL, p. 32.

29 *Oeuvres*, Florence de Lussy ed., Gallimard, Paris, 1999 (hereafter OE), p. 730.

30 OE, p. 722; my italics.

31 C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 2009, p. xiv.

relational and the fact that care ethics itself is ‘relational through and through’. Many scholars share Elisabeth Conradi’s view that care is “an interactivity that involves a certain type of attentive communicative contact that can be described as a societal practice with transformative potential”<sup>32</sup>. This is one of the things that makes care ethics so political: the chief communicative skill it calls for—listening—is deeply relational. Care ethics is also political *and critical* in that it alerts us to the limits of some accounts of emancipatory politics that emphasize mere formal equality. As the cases of voting/civic rights’ expansion and of decolonization indicate, “voices” can be given to groups without great concern being given to whether the conditions are there for *registering or listening to those voices*<sup>33</sup>.

Now, if speaking is nothing without listening, it seems particularly odd that political theory has rarely sought to theorize listening. We cannot enter here into a lengthy discussion of why that is so, but we can suspect that this disregard may have to do with the fact that listening is more resistant to observation or measurement and that it tends to be regarded as fairly undemanding and risk-free. These facile presuppositions have been called into question by democratic theorist Susan Bickford, who has at once underscored the great courage listening takes as well as its radically intersubjective nature<sup>34</sup>. Bickford writes: “To highlight the role of listening is to confront the intersubjective character of politics. Communication inherently presupposes different beings *and* the possibility of something between them; it points to both separateness and relatedness”<sup>35</sup>. To insist that listening is something relational that takes place ‘in between us’ means, in part, that we cannot theorize it without considering that it often takes place in situations of inequality, tensions, mistrust and even antipathy. And this is largely what makes attentive listening so arduous and so rare: after all, the sort of openness and initial ‘move’ it requires *from listeners* entails vulnerability. This is worth emphasizing because most accounts of attentiveness typically emphasize the vulnerability of those who are *being listened to* (their vulnerability is often identified as what ‘calls us’ as care-givers). But we ought not to underestimate the vulnerability of listeners here: when one makes an effort to genuinely listen to someone else, one takes a risk. The risk is not solely that the other might not respond to our query or

32 E. Conradi, “Redoing Care: Societal Transformation through Critical Practice”, *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 9, 2 (2015), p. 119.

33 A point eloquently made by Fiona Robinson in “Stop Talking and Listen”, *Millennium*, 39, 3 (2011), pp. 845-860.

34 S. Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996, pp. 148-149.

35 Bickford, *Dissonance*, cit., p. 4.

might refuse to acknowledge our presence. The risk is, as Iris Young rightly noted, that the person we have listened to might, in turn, make claims upon us—they might ask for our money, our help, time, political solidarity, or empathy<sup>36</sup>. And it is far from obvious that most of us are interested in taking the risk of having these claims made upon ourselves; it requires a rare level of comfort with vulnerability and a radical generosity.

Throughout her oeuvre, Weil also insisted that attentive listening was a difficult and rare kind of gift—but one that could accomplish much politically. Asking the question ‘What are you going through?’ entails, for Weil, “the recognition that *the sufferer exists*, not simply as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled ‘unfortunate’, but as a man, exactly like us”<sup>37</sup>. If listening takes place ‘in-between’, what we see here is that what this ‘in-between’ is made of is recognition—for Weil, it is the recognition of the longing for good that is present in all and that is worthy of respect. One could suggest that for Weil as much as for Young and care theorists like Laugier and Robinson<sup>38</sup>, attentive listening is perhaps the most fundamental moral commitment that one can make—it is the very basis of ethics. Weil invites us to such a conclusion by suggesting that those who suffer or are excluded have “no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention”<sup>39</sup>. In her last essays, Weil came up with a list of human needs that she thought ought to inform the new French Constitution after the war and here, quite tellingly, she described equality (one fundamental need) as consisting in “the public recognition, effectively expressed in institutions and manners” that an equal degree of attention is due to all<sup>40</sup>.

Given what has just been said about attention and recognition, it might be hard for readers to understand how interpreters could have seen in Weilian attentiveness something antipolitical. Bickford, for instance, believes that Weilian listening cannot be considered political because it calls for too radical a ‘suspension’ of our personal concerns or interests (one Weil considered necessary for truly receptive listening ):

political listening cannot be grounded in passivity or an absence of self, for politics itself requires precisely the opposite. [...] if I somehow absent myself when you speak, in order to ‘hear’ you, and you do the same for me, in what sense are

36 Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, cit., pp. 58-59.

37 AD, p. 97; my italics.

38 S. Laugier, “L’éthique comme politique de l’ordinaire”, *Multitudes*, 37-38 (2009), p. 84.

39 AD 96

40 EL 81

we really together as peers? Politics requires self-involvement with others in action, where we do not ‘draw back’<sup>41</sup>.

But Bickford’s charge is imprecise: Weilian listening is never a ‘drawing back’ in the sense in which Bickford understands it. There may be particularly grave situations of exclusion or suffering where ‘being together’ calls at first for a more radical type of *silent* attending on the part of the privileged (the case of Canadian aboriginal women is one such case in my view). But even this type of hyper-receptive silent attentiveness is never *apolitical*. For one thing, the fundamental Weilian question—‘What are you going through?’—must be asked in *all* cases (even in the toughest cases of democratic exclusion or suffering) and this entails an *active* political gesture on our part. More importantly, to attend properly to fellow beings who suffer must set in motion a process of *remedying this harm* through various legal, institutional measures. As Weil explicitly emphasized, justice requires not only listening to the barely audible scream of those who have been harmed, but also addressing the “material consequences” of the harm<sup>42</sup>.

Now, if it is incorrect to see in Weilian listening an anti-political selflessness, Bickford has nevertheless correctly identified, in her work, a limit of Weil’s account of attentive listening: some of its overly solitary aspects. For Weil, despite being a relational, recognition-giving practice and despite relying on institutions like schools for its development, attending was, at base, something that had an essentially individual dimension. Very Rousseauian in her views of socio-political life, Weil often emphasized the solitude necessary for proper deliberation and policy-making that was conducive to social justice. She believed that only individuals can pay attention—not groups or institutions<sup>43</sup>. It is for this reason that she called for the abolition of political parties<sup>44</sup>, which she thought compromised the type of rational judgment, listening and concern that is the mark of a good citizen or elected representative.

But with or without political parties, attention can in fact never be a purely individual phenomenon (nor a dyadic one for that matter). What we pay attention to is always partially socially-conditioned and influenced by friends, the media, teachers, advertisers, etc. This is not to suggest that the social character of listening is necessarily or always problematic. As Citton rightly argues, we often best notice the beautiful, the strange or the obvious but neglected when

41 Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy*, p. 146.

42 EL, p. 39; OE, p. 726

43 She also thought that there cannot truly be a *collective* exercise of intelligence. OE, p. 1043.

44 Weil, ‘Note sur la suppression générale des partis politiques’, in EL.

we listen *together*—when there is, in other words, joint attention<sup>45</sup>. Let us take note here of the intimate connections that exist between joint attention and corporeal presence. Psychological research on attention has shown that around the age of nine months, babies develop an ability for ‘joint’ attention—an ability to follow the gaze and attention of their care-takers<sup>46</sup>. That babies learn to attend partially by watching the gaze and bodily movements of others around them underscores quite well that attention is indeed a deeply intersubjective thing and that corporeal presence makes a difference<sup>47</sup>. Moreover, much research has indicated that good ‘joint attention skills’ in early childhood tend to correlate with solid social and linguistic skills later in life—and in particular, the capacity to experience empathy. But while there are significant connections between empathy and listening, I wish to argue, in the next section, that we ought not to insist on the presence of empathy as a necessary *requirement* of political listening.

## 5. FUSIONAL ENCOUNTERS, EMPATHY AND AUTONOMY

The view that attentiveness is closely tied to love or empathy is fairly prevalent amongst care theorists. For the likes of Agata Zielinski and Maurice Hamington, attentiveness to others opens us to the “sphere of moral sentiments”. Similarly, Sandra Haegert defines attention as a “gazing at another in sympathy”<sup>48</sup>. But this emphasis on empathy has raised concerns—among the critics of care ethics, but also among care ethicists themselves (e.g. Selma Sevenhuijsen; Patricia Paperman)<sup>49</sup>. The worry, for some, is that there might be something a bit too fusional or too exhausting about the type of emotional investment some seem to call for. Citton speaks for many when he chides care theory for having focused exclusively on a kind of intense, ‘fusional’ attentive-

45 Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention*, cit., p. 139.

46 E.g. Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention*, cit., p. 40. S. Mendivea, M. H. Bornstein, C. Sebastián, “The role of maternal attention-directing strategies in 9-month-old infants attaining joint engagement”, *Infant Behav Dev.* 3, 1(2013), pp. 115-23.

47 Charles Taylor underscores this point when he invites us to consider the qualitative difference between listening to a symphony alone on one’s record player and attending a symphony with others. See “Cross-purposes”, *Philosophical Arguments*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1995.

48 A. Zielinsky, “L’ethique du care. Une nouvelle façon de prendre soin”, *Études*, 413 (2010), p. 637. S. Haegert, “The Ethics of Self”, *Nursing Ethics*, 11, 5 (2011), p.440. See also M. Hamington, “Politics is not a game: the radical potential of care”, in D. Engester and M. Hamington, *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, cit., p. 281.

49 E.g. S. Sevenhuijsen, *Citizenship and ethics of care*, Routledge, London, 2003, pp. 78-80.

ness. We need ‘joint attention’ certainly, he says, but not *amalgamated attention*, not an attention that eradicates autonomy<sup>50</sup>.

Now, because democratic theorists like Barber, Young and Bickford have also struggled with Agata Zielinski the issue of empathy and its connection to (political) listening, I propose that we briefly turn to their work. The questions I wish to consider here are: first, whether Citton is right to suggest that care theorists (with Weil) have sought in attentiveness a kind of ‘suffering with’ that is risky for the autonomy of both care-givers and care-receivers? Secondly, ought we to see empathy a requirement for listening or merely insist that it can be one possible benefits of listening? Or should we insist on both of these things?

The view that listening requires empathy *and* that it leads to more empathy is one that can be found in Benjamin Barber’s work. In *Strong Democracy*, Barber offers an account of a ‘thick’ participatory democracy that might succeed in alleviating some contemporary alienation. The central part of his account is the notion of *democratic talk*, which involves both speaking and listening: “[it] involves receiving as well as expressing, hearing as well as speaking, and *empathizing as well as uttering*”<sup>51</sup>. The last part is worth noting: for Barber, listening matters politically chiefly because it can mediate conflict, build trust and increase equality through empathy. Barber writes:

‘I will listen’ means to the strong democrat not that I will scan my adversary’s position for weaknesses and potential trade-offs [...] It means, rather, ‘I will put myself in his place. [...] I will strain to hear *what makes us alike*, I will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose [...] Listening is a mutualistic art that by its very practice enhances equality. The empathetic listener *becomes more like his interlocutor* as the two bridge the differences between them by conversation.’<sup>52</sup>

In short, empathy is for Barber both a requirement of listening and its outcome, and—more problematically—it is linked to a diminishing of difference. Unsurprisingly, some readers have objected to the close links Barber draws between empathy and listening. Bickford, for instance, agrees with him that listening is an undervalued part of citizenship, but she insists that proper political listening is not chiefly a “caring or amicable practice” that *requires* empathy. Upholding such a view insufficiently valorizes diversity and ignores the likely possibility that listening might lead to disagreement or conflict.

50 Citton, *Pour une écologie de l’attention*, cit., p. 40.

51 B. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, UCP, Berkeley, 2003, p. 174.

52 Barber, *Strong Democracy*, cit., p. 175.



Young, while not reacting specifically to Barber, also expresses concern about the suggestion that listening *requires* empathy. It is within the context of her discussion of Benhabib's work that Young criticizes the view that moral respect requires adopting the other's point of view: a good communicative theory should never presume that there can be symmetry. Such perfect identification with the other's position is impossible and it is politically dangerous because it thwarts listening (since the latter requires humility). Young writes:

If you think you already know how the other people feel and judge because you have imaginatively represented their perspective to yourself, then you may not listen to the expression of their perspective very openly. [...] In moral humility, one starts with the assumption that *one cannot see things from the other's perspective* and *waits to learn* by listening to the other person to what extent they have had similar experiences.<sup>53</sup>

I think that Bickford and Young are largely correct: while some emotional investment *can* enrich listening, we ought not to insist on strong empathy *as a necessary requirement to listening*. Empathy might be one (positive) end result of listening carefully, but it should not be seen as a prerequisite. For one thing, most socio-political situations entail listening to others with whom we have fairly little in common—and at times, with people we do not like very much. And it is precisely in these tough cases that listening is of utmost importance.

I do not wish to deny that in many cases of listening empathy can play a beneficial role. Nor do I wish to suggest that it is impossible to experience empathy without putting at risk one's autonomy. It is possible. Here it is pertinent to turn to Weil, since she proposed an account of empathy whose subtleties have rarely been appreciated. Indeed, many readers have seen in Weilian compassion a kind of fusional 'suffering fest'. But this reading is incomplete. Even in those (most lyrical) moments when Weil calls for radical forms of compassion in a concerned listener, she remains wedded to the view that individuals' autonomy ought never be compromised—one should never wish to 'be one' with another, or think like the other. Throughout her oeuvre, Weil insisted on the desirability of keeping a self-respecting detachment in caring relationships. Note, for instance, the manner in which she describes friendship and pure compassion:

In a perfect friendship... the two friends accept to be completely separate beings rather than one, they respect the distance that flow from the fact that they are distinct beings. [...] Thanks to this supernatural virtue of respect for human au-

<sup>53</sup> Young, *Intersecting Voices*, cit., p. 49; my italics.

tonomy, friendship is very similar to the pure forms of compassion and gratitude brought about by affliction<sup>54</sup>.

Weil was of the view that to wish for a concordance of our opinions with others is to show them disrespect and to compromise our intellectual probity<sup>55</sup>. For Weil, attentive listening (despite the fact that it *can sometimes* entail strong empathy) ought never turn into a minimizing of difference. As such, one could say that Weil is much closer to the position of Young than that of Barber: both women remind us of the desirability of a certain distance and asymmetry.

## 6. NEGLECTED WEILIAN INSIGHTS: LISTENING, TECHNOLOGY AND TIME

What we have seen above is that for some care scholars and contemporary political theorists, listening constitutes a relational and embodied practice that is key for meaningful encounters and social recognition. But if many scholars have had rich insights about what listening entails (and why it matters), they have been slightly less voluble about the concrete implications of some of their insights. Certainly, some have mentioned some practical proposals, but without always considering what stands in the way of achieving these. Barber, for instance, called (in 1984) for more referendums, neighbourhood assemblies and community/citizen service; he also placed great hopes in technology—praising the potential of interactive televised town meetings and a “Civic videotext Service”<sup>56</sup>. At the end of *Listening Democracy*, Dobson also briefly touches on prescriptions. After noting the (limited) potential of citizen juries and social media, he proposes that we ask political representatives to sign up for a distance learning course where, through an interactive sophisticated website, they could practice “the subtleties of active listening”<sup>57</sup>. Amongst care theorists, Robinson suggests that one way to improve listening practices is, quite simply, to rehabilitate the value of care and *to engage in more acts of care daily*. For Sevenhuijsen, more institutionalized attentiveness partially calls for better consultative mechanisms<sup>58</sup>, and, for Noddings, better listening requires attending to the quality of our education system. Noddings is one of the

54 Weil, OE 758. See also OC VI-2, p. 458.

55 Weil, OE 759.

56 Barber, *Strong Democracy*, cit., pp. 274-278.

57 A. Dobson, *Listening for Democracy*, OUP, Oxford, 2014, pp. 178-195.

58 S. Sevenhuijsen et al, “South African Social Welfare Policy: An Analysis Using the Ethic of Care”, *Critical Social Policy*, 23, 3 (2003), pp. 299-321.

many scholars to have—correctly—noted that for Weil, better attentiveness requires better schools.

But as I will indicate now, Weil had *other* very concrete things to say about what could improve listening and about what sort of conditions could *thwart* it. When Weil invited her contemporaries to “stop, attend, and listen”<sup>59</sup> she had in mind more than just an invitation to hyper-receptivity; she had in mind a particular *bodily* engagement that called for radical material and political changes. In addition to a revamped and accessible public education system, Weil called for substantive redistributive measures, a celebration (and better remuneration) of manual work, and an improved selection process for individuals in positions of authority (judges, police officers, civil servants). These positions, she insisted, ought to be given to those “who are able and eager to hear and understand”<sup>60</sup> the awkward claims of the socially excluded. Interested in creating a socio-political environment characterized by “attentive silence” rather than noise, she also called for the abolition of political parties, the taming of dishonest voices in media and in advertising, the diminishing of the size of factories.

There is a great deal to be said about all of these radical and even disquieting proposals. But for our purposes, I will consider one of her more important contributions to emancipatory thought: her call for a more controlled temporality at work and a more reflective relationship to technology. Although no luddite, Weil believed that one of the most serious obstacles to our capacity to attend might come from an excessive speed and technological complexity that humans could no longer fully control and comprehend (and where little room was left for creativity). That time matters and technology matters: these are among Weil’s most pertinent and forgotten insights—insights that we would do well to consider, given that recent ideological and technological changes seem to be taking us away from careful listening. Weil was particularly appalled by the pace and the scientific management of factories that undermined workers’ capacity to engage thoughtfully and creatively in production. She thought that our educational and work environments should be sites in which we are able, on a daily basis, to engage in careful attentiveness. She thought that these skills would, in turn, serve us in our wider ethical and political lives. In the next section, then, I propose to draw our attention to a few of the technological imperatives and changes that are *undermining* our capacity to listen effectively today.

<sup>59</sup> Weil, OE, p. 762.

<sup>60</sup> Weil, EL, pp.14-15.

The sober preface Barber wrote for the third edition (2003) of his *Strong Democracy* speaks to these changes: here, Barber claims that his earlier faith in the coming of a more attentive democracy has been dampened by recent trends in new digital media and by neoliberalism. We just saw that in the first edition Barber argued that interactive technology could foster better listening; he is now of the view that social media's "breakneck speed and instant accessibility" may in fact "encumber and compromise democratic deliberation, which demands a slow and deliberate pace for rational, democratic decision-making"<sup>61</sup>. What is also worrisome for him is neoliberals' attack on welfare statism and their hostility to participatory democracies. Barber is obviously neither the first nor the last to decry neoliberalism. It is fairly common for social scientists to denounce neoliberalism, and feminist care theorists are no exception<sup>62</sup>. Many have rightly underscored that neoliberalism's glorification of markets and of the independent individual is incompatible with a relational and responsive politics of care. What I want to focus on here, however, is neoliberalism's love of increased speed and of information and communication technologies (ICT)—a particularly worrisome marriage in my view.

There are obviously a number of institutions in which we witness technological imperatives undermining our capacity to listen. For the purposes of this paper, however, I wish to focus on the university. This is a particularly important institution because, as Weil would have thought, it serves both to cultivate the (highly political) capacities for attentive listening and it is an institution in which listening *itself* is the core of its practice. Universities are currently facing a substantive threat as the possibilities offered by information technology combine with the neoliberal drive towards "la destruction méthodique des structures collectives capables de faire obstacle à la logique du marché pur" (to cite Pierre Bourdieu's definition of neoliberalism)<sup>63</sup>. Again, universities are institutions where listening skills are both taught *and exercised*; and as we will see, the material conditions of neoliberal universities place this at risk.

That universities have undergone significant changes in recent decades is fairly evident: for instance, most British, Australian, American and Canadian universities have faced significant cuts in funding since the 1980s and many

61 Barber, *Strong Democracy*, cit., p. xv.

62 See Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, cit.; Engster and Hamington, *Care Ethics and Political Theory*, cit.

63 P. Bourdieu, "L'essence du néolibéralisme", *Le monde diplomatique*, 1998: <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1998/03/BOURDIEU/3609>>.

have adopted more corporate management practices<sup>64</sup>. It is with this context in mind that one has to look at the increasing pressure many departments face to create more online courses. While there are a few laudable motivations for creating these courses (e.g. more interactivity, less hierarchy, more accessibility), one important reason has been financial<sup>65</sup>. Since neoliberalism celebrates choice, profitability and flexibility, it feeds the view that students are paying customers that ought to be attracted and satisfied—partially through the offering of a wide-range of flexible options, including time-compressed courses and completely online courses where no physical encounter between students and professors is ever required.

The recent increase in online, distance learning represents a disquieting trend in terms of the cultivation of social skills and, in particular, of dialogical and listening skills—those skills Weil thought so central to social justice. There is little doubt that Weil would have questioned our eager turn to a teaching mode that undermines one of the central requirements of active listening: bodily presence. Now, as telephone conversations indicate, it is obviously possible to listen without being in the same room. But I suggested earlier that bodily presence adds an additional texture and meaning to our listening, as does shared attention. These are things that online technologies have not been able to replicate in distance learning (nor in digital governmental public consultations for that matter)<sup>66</sup>. A good classroom discussion and civic debate must entail some sensorial involvement—an affective shared moment of attention paid to certain individuals, books or claims together, with all the unpredictability, vulnerability, discomfort and frustration that this can raise. Learning, for *both student and teacher*, is no mere transmission of information; it is a flesh-and-bone encountering of wonder, generosity, difference, boredom and conflict—in short, it entails an immersion in all-too-human, social living. In a sense, it seems absurd to have to defend the importance of having human encounters, of defending physical presence and corporeal attention *as a good* in itself. But this is partially what we will have to do when university administrators ask us to explain why we do not have even more distance teaching offerings. We will need, then, the philosophical tools necessary to justify embodied listening as an ethico-politically significant practice.

64 H. Menzies and J. Newson, “Time, Stress and Intellectual Engagement in Academic Work: Exploring Gender Difference”, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 15, 5 (2008), pp. 505-509.

65 Yvonne Hartman and Sandy Darab, “A Call for Slow Scholarship: A Case Study on the Intensification of Academic Life and Its Implications for Pedagogy”, *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 34 (2012), pp. 49-60.

66 Citton, *Pour une écologie de l’attention*, cit., p. 146.

I emphasized ‘both students *and teachers*’ above because rarely do we hear about the loss that online courses might represent for professors. But we know that good scholarship sometimes comes about by listening to and answering student’s questions and reactions. One might counter that taking questions, giving answers and discussing texts can be done online; but there is still some qualitative difference with online forums<sup>67</sup>. As noted above, observing the bodily language of others can help us gather more information, adjust our speaking style, prevent withdrawal and misunderstanding.

Now, bodies come in all shapes, colours and sizes—with some closer than others to what is treated as ‘normal’. And for those who are not close to those norms, being the object of the attentive gaze of fellow students or of a teacher is not always comforting or conducive to better ‘democratic talk’. I underscore this here because one of the potential benefits of online courses (or online government consultations), is that they might allow individuals who often are the object of oppressive stares to participate in a discussion without the weight of that gaze. As noted above, embodiment certainly raises a host of difficulties for socio-political encounters and recognition. But I am not convinced that opting for more online teaching (or sacrificing presence as a whole) is the responsible reaction we should have towards our (bodily) humanity and these difficulties. And we should certainly be wary of letting neoliberal governments or university administrators serve us disingenuous arguments for the democratic elements of digital anonymity when their real purposes are financial.

Some might respond that the move towards more online teaching or online politics is inexorable. Perhaps; and some benefits will no doubt come from it. But as more of our pedagogical and social encounters take place in the digital world, we have to find ways to *compensate* for the loss in opportunities for joint corporeal attention. Weil would likely have agreed with the following observation made by a professor during a qualitative study of the effects of distance learning on university students:

I worry... about the absence of embodiment [and] the people who are going to make it through the [university] system and arrive at decision-making places are people who have an absolute disdain for ... the human body! Does one want people in policy making, making decisions about one’s health... who are so immune to, or *who need so little* inter-human action?<sup>68</sup>

These policy-makers and decision-makers are the very same individuals whose attentive listening skills Weil was so concerned about. She was con-

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Menzies and Newson, “Time, Stress and Intellectual Engagement in Academic Work: Exploring Gender Difference”, cit., p. 517.

vinced that if the French governing class, its police officers and its judges, did not receive much in the way of training in attention, no increase in social justice was likely<sup>69</sup>. Now, if Weil would have worried that increasing online teaching might harm the listening skills of potential policy-makers, she would also have asked academics to consider the possibility that an increased presence of ICT in their teaching and research might also give them a false sense of ‘travelling’—of having learned about others, but without having felt very much. Deeply convinced that “the body has a role in all learning”<sup>70</sup>, Weil left her day teaching job to work in factory, convinced that intellectuals had failed to understand working-class oppression because they never truly *felt* it. Weil was indeed of the view that critical scholarship must travel, that it must experience things with the body.

Another thing that would have worried Weil in our neoliberal teaching environments (and workplaces) is the increasing pressure some of us face to compress our teaching in less time and—more generally—to hurry and offer “speedy pedagogy”<sup>71</sup>. As our class sizes and the quantification of our research performance increase (and the undergraduate seminar starts looking more like a luxury than a norm), the time for individual attention and listening to students is reduced radically. Weil insisted that for meaningful listening to take place, one needed *to stop and to wait*—and she meant this literally. For her, it was in this attentive “temps d’arrêt” that one found the root of all respect and responsibility for others<sup>72</sup>. Undoubtedly, time pressures can be stimulating (“speed thrills” as Vostal has noted), but under particular circumstances, they can take their toll on the mental health of those who experience them—particularly on those who struggle with more vulnerability and uncertainty (e.g. untenured or contract part-time faculty)<sup>73</sup>. Speed alone is not necessarily the problem however. As many scholars acknowledge, the problem rests, more specifically, in the *tension* between our “increasing rate of change, volumes

69 EL, p. 177.

70 OE, p. 701.

71 Hartman and Darab, “A Call for Slow Scholarship: A Case Study on the Intensification of Academic Life and Its Implications for Pedagogy”, cit., p. 56. Also Luke Martell, “The slow university: Inequality, power and alternatives”, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 15, 3 (2014); A. Mountz et al., “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance”, *ACME. An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14, 4 (2015), pp. 1235-1259: <<http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/acme/article/view/1058/1141>>.

72 Weil, *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force* in OE.

73 B. Davies and P. Bansel, “The time of their lives? Academic workers in neoliberal time(s)”, *Health Sociology Review*, 14, 1 (2005), pp. 47-58.

and quantities of activities and pursuits” and the fact that we have a relatively stable and fixed amount of temporal resources<sup>74</sup>.

Weil made a similar claim in *La condition ouvrière*—where she underscored the significance of our temporal limitations (“time is the first limit, the only limit” she observed). She considered it important for us to *accept* that limit on an ‘existential plane’ and, even more significantly, to organize our socio-political and work lives with that limit in mind<sup>75</sup>. Weil saw clearly that mental and social distress would come from ignoring this counsel. These insights about time she partially credits to her experience working in factories, where she discovered that the chief sources of oppression for workers were speed and orders: both thwart workers’ capacity to attend; both entail losses in autonomy and a sense of control<sup>76</sup>. Like critics of ‘time compression’ today, Weil saw that speed (and technology for that matter) is not always harmful. But speed can become a source of oppression and distress when the hurried-pace is mixed with financial insecurity, fear of unemployment or the sense that one does not control one’s cadence and machine any longer. Indeed, for Weil, what characterized a healthy relationship to time (and technology) was the *amount of control one has over it*. She regarded time autonomy as critical for our capacity to attend and, more generally, for well-being: “There has to be.... around each person, some space, some free disposition of one’s time—possibilities for reaching elevated degrees of attention”<sup>77</sup>.

Universities are clearly not the only institutions to have experienced budget cuts and increased pressures to do more in less time—our civil services and health care institutions have as well. Part of the reason why I considered the case of universities is because of their unique labour conditions—unique in the sense that academics are exceedingly privileged with regards to time and *control* over time. So the fact that some of them are said to experience increased time pressures and a loss of temporal autonomy should give us pause. And not surprisingly, there have recently been numerous calls for ‘slow science’ or ‘slow academia’. While the term might raise eyebrows, some of this research has convincingly pointed to a number of trends that indicate that the impact of neoliberalism on education (and science) is harmful—not only for academics but also for students and society at large<sup>78</sup>. Many have argued that education

74 Vostal, “Speed kills, speed thrills: constraining and enabling accelerations in academic work-life”, *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 13, 3 (2015), p. 298.

75 OE, pp. 125-126.

76 OE, p. 146.

77 EL, p. 21.

78 E.g. K. Lynch, “Neo-liberalism and Marketization”, *European Educational Research Journal*, 5, 1 (2006), pp. 1-17.



and scholarship cannot be sped up indefinitely; neither can we insist on the quantification of all performance<sup>79</sup> without having some qualitative loss. We ought, as such, to “unhasten creative and reflective intellectual work”<sup>80</sup>. Like Weil, these critics have stressed that the problem here is not only ‘speed’, but rather, the sense of *loss of control over speed* and over the technology we are invited to use in our teaching and research.

It is because they have realized that the issue is not simply speed but control over speed that some scholars have recently called for the replacement of the term “slow” by the terms ‘careful’ or ‘caring’<sup>81</sup>. Some scholars of ‘slow living’ had already used the term ‘careful’ to describe the type of work or ethical encounters they seek. Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig, for instance, describe slowness as “a mode of attention, reflection and care in everyday practices”<sup>82</sup>. But quite significantly, when some invoke the language of ‘care’ or of a ‘care ethics’, they do not resort to the work of Gilligan or Tronto, but rather, to Foucault and his notion of care *of the self*<sup>83</sup>. One of the effects this resort to Foucault has had in my view is to encourage many to think of the project of ‘careful academia’ or ‘careful living’ largely as an *individualized* one. But it cannot be an individualized project—for as Weil correctly pointed out, this would not address any of the *structural, political and material conditions* that affect our experience of time. Moreover, to individualize resistance to “social acceleration” in neoliberal universities (or institutions more generally) is problematic because we cannot ask those who are most ‘time poor’ or most vulnerable on the job market to bear the responsibility for taking on the great task of ‘slowing down’ the academic environment in order to make better listening and critical engagement possible.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a philosophical defense of the value of attentive listening for recognition and social justice. My account of attentive listening

79 In both research and teaching; see Davies and Bansel, “The time of their lives? Academic workers in neoliberal time(s)”, cit.; but compare with Vostal, “Speed kills, speed thrills: constraining and enabling accelerations in academic work-life”, cit.

80 Menzies and Newson, “Time, Stress and Intellectual Engagement in Academic Work: Exploring Gender Difference”, cit., p. 519.

81 E.g. Hsu “The slow food movement and time shortage: beyond the dichotomy of fast and slow”, *Journal of Sociology*, 51, 3 (2015), pp.628–642.

82 W. Parkins and G. Craig, *Slow Living*, Bloomsbury, London, 2006, p. 59.

83 There are of course exceptions; e.g. A. Mountz et al., “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance”, cit.

has pointed to the great significance of corporeal presence, as well as to the intersubjective nature of listening and the vulnerability it entails. We have ultimately raised a number of questions that we have not been able to fully resolve here—for instance, the question of empathy’s relationship to difference, and the difficulty of listening in situations of antipathy. In the last part of the paper, I underscored the urgency of attending to some of the material and temporal conditions under which we work, learn and try to listen to others. While I focused on universities, I intended my comments to be of wider significance for other socio-political institutions. For instance, by stressing the importance of presence and by arguing that online research or online courses cannot offer us as morally textured a listening, I sought to underscore more generally that in our civic debates (or in public inquiries), digital interactions cannot fully replace real presence.

Moreover, the Weilian insight that a particular temporality—an unhurried, *controlled* pace—is of importance for attentive listening is pertinent for most dimensions of our lives as citizens. Especially in cases as complex and as vital for recognition as the *Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women*, people ought to appreciate the desirability of a moderate pace—a not so self-evident thing given that in the eyes of many, slow pace is typically associated with foot-dragging civil servants or sluggish bureaucracies. This association may not be completely baseless, but we ought to carefully distinguish between bureaucratic inertia and the careful, unhurried and patient processes that thoughtful judicial procedures and politics sometimes require. As Sheldon Wolin correctly noted, political life does tend to call for a “leisurely pace”—a careful pace<sup>84</sup>. But, to return to our Canadian example, to say that the government (or worried tax payers) should accept the ‘leisurely pace’ of an *Inquiry* does not mean that some actions cannot be taken immediately—as the Canadian government acknowledged by injecting important sums of money into women’s shelters and social housing, even prior to the official beginning of the Inquiry. Indeed, we do not always have to choose between timely action and careful listening, reflection and deliberation.

In short, with Weil, my main goal was to argue that to take listening seriously as a precious ethical skill requires attending to concrete material conditions obtaining in our social and political institutions. It requires focussing on those conditions that foster or undermine our capacity for listening. Attending to these material conditions was, for Weil, the “greatest political problem” of all. Indeed, she claimed that our chief political concern should be the manner in which individuals spend their days: “If they spend them in conditions that

84 S. Wolin, ‘What time is it?’, *Theory and Event*, 1, 1 (1991), pp. 1-10.

render materially impossible a sustained and high attention effort, it will be impossible to have justice”<sup>85</sup>.

85 OC, VI: 2, p. 380.