

Simone Weil's Communication Ethics¹

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Abstract

Simone Weil describes love as radical attention that suspends egoistic concerns to pursue solely the good of another. Although contemporary communication ethics emphasizes responsiveness and dialogue, it seldom addresses how individuals can entirely overcome self-interest to transparently recognize the other's need. This article proposes that Weil's concepts (particularly attention, *décration*, and *metaxu*) fill that theoretical gap. Grounding Weil's ethics in Plato and mysticism, the discussion places her ideas in dialogue with current communication ethics, demonstrating their practical relevance. Weil's notion of attention provides a profound reinterpretation of ethical listening as a form of selfless presence, while *décration* offers a framework for decentering ego-driven speech. Further, *metaxu* clarifies the ethical role of communication mediators in facilitating genuine understanding rather than superficial engagement or division. Ultimately, Weil's ethics offers a normative criterion for ethical discourse: communication is morally good when it serves as a channel for the genuine well-being of the other.

Keywords: Simone Weil, attention, communication ethics, digital attention economy, *décration*.

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Simone Weil'in İletişim Etiği²

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Öz

Simone Weil sevgiyi, kişinin kendi benliğine ilişkin kaygılarını askıya alarak yalnızca başkasının iyiliğini gözettiği radikal bir dikkat olarak tanımlar. Çağdaş iletişim etiği, diyalog ve karşılıklı yanıt verebilirliği vurgulasa da bireylerin kendi çıkarlarını bütünüyle aşarak başkasının ihtiyaçlarını şeffaf biçimde nasıl fark edebilecekleri konusuna nadiren değinir. Bu makale, Weil'in kavramlarının (özellikle dikkat, yaratımın feshi ve metaxu) söz konusu teorik boşluğu doldurduğunu öne sürmektedir. Weil'in etiğini Platoncu düşünce ve mistisizm temelinde ele alan tartışma, bu fikirleri günümüz iletişim etiğiyle ilişkilendirerek pratik önemlerini ortaya koyar. Weil'in dikkat kavramı, etik dinlemeyi benliğin dışına çıkararak tamamen diğerine yönelmiş bir mevcudiyet olarak derinlemesine yeniden yorumlar. Décréation ise ego merkezli söylemin aşılması için bir çerçeve sunar. Ayrıca metaxu kavramı, iletişimde araçların yüzeysel etkileşim veya bölünme yerine sahici anlayışı kolaylaştıran etik rolünü açıklar. Sonuç olarak, Weil'in etiği iletişim etiği için normatif bir ölçüt sunar: İletişim, ancak diğerinin gerçek iyiliğinin aracı olduğunda etik açıdan iyidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Simone Weil, Dikkat, Yaratımın Feshi, İletişim Etiği, Dijital Dikkat Ekonomisi.

² Bu makale, yazarın Prof. Dr. Hülya Şimşek danışmanlığında hazırladığı "İçerideki Öteki Olarak Tanrı: Simone Weil'de Tanrı, Benlik ve Sevgi" başlıklı doktora tezinden kısmen türetilmiştir (Çöl, 2023).

Introduction

The aim in this paper is to argue for Weil's ultimate purpose in and through philosophy, which is love, and how her understanding of love is relevant today in the field of communication ethics. Simone Weil makes clear distinctions between carnal love and heavenly love. In this sense she reminds us of some earlier mystics and the overall concept of ancient mysticism. She also warns us of false mysticism and believes that mistaking carnal love for heavenly love at times is quite dangerous (Weil, 2009, p. 173.). According to Weil, love is not an emotion or feeling, but rather a force or energy that compels us to seek the good of others. In her view, love is not self-seeking or possessive, but rather it is other-oriented and self-sacrificing.

One of the most important concepts in Weil's philosophical understanding is *attention* (Weil, 2003). Weil believed that true love involves paying attention to others and their needs, rather than being focused on our own desires. In other words, love requires a kind of radical self-forgetfulness/self-effacement, in which we put aside our own interests and focus solely on the well-being of the other person. The role of suffering is also important in her understanding of love. She believed that true love involves a willingness to bear the suffering of others, and to share in their pain. In this way, Weil's understanding of love is closely linked to her belief in the value of compassion, empathy and the idea of equality. Weil argued that true love involves treating others as equals, regardless of their social status or circumstances. This means recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual and seeking to build relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. And finally, the concept of beauty is also another aspect of her understanding of love, which is also, surely, inspired by Plato.

Weil's Christian beliefs are based and exemplified in the Ancients as she recalls Pherecydes³ saying that during creation Zeus transforms himself into "*Love*" and brings "harmony, and love, and he has sown in all things the identity and the unity which spreads throughout the universe" (Weil, 1958, p. 89). God creates not out of necessity or some master plan but out of pure love, and this is the only way everything makes sense for Simone Weil, otherwise there is always an ulterior motive imposing human characteristics on the most divine being which itself is a paradox all together. The only way there is to get out of such self-imprisoning thinking is that love, in its most unconditional and purest form, is the binding and creative force behind God's work of art. This kind of love could only ever be experienced or understood through mystical experience such as what Weil calls *attention* or the act of praying which she compared with George Herbert's poem *Love* which she learns in her days in Solesmes in 1938. This experience breaks Weil's arguments on "insolubility of the problem of God" and she realizes that there is a potential for a personal connection between a human being and God (Weil, 2009, p. 69). After her experience with Herbert's poem, she began reading the mystics and started to believe that Plato was a mystic and "the Iliad is bathed in Christian light, and that Dionysus and Osiris are in a certain sense Christ himself" (Weil 2009, p. 70). As we have seen previously, the Christian light in the Ancients

³ In her own words: "A Syrian who was perhaps the master of Pythagoras at the beginning of the sixth century B.C." (Weil, 1958, p. 89).

or the Ancients in Christ is very much a main theme of Weil's writings and notes. This is quite understandably demonstrated through simple comparisons of texts and ideas. However, the base concepts of Self, God, and in this case, Love are such strongly biased words that it is difficult to tear away from the everyday *flimsy* uses and shift our focus on philosophy. We must again try and search for the meaning through Weil. This is why it is appropriate to begin with Weil's true inspiration: Plato. For, her understanding of love and mysticism are completely found within Plato's concepts in the light of Pythagorean doctrines. Weil is so passionate about Plato, Pythagoras, the Greek tragedies, or rather the Greek philosophical, poetic, and mystic knowledge, that, most of her writing is devoted on these three along with lines and ideas from the Gospels and Christian mysticism in her work *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes*.⁴

1. Love in Plato

Plato is the foundation of Weil's philosophical stance. Plato and his works have influenced her from the beginning even before she turned to Christianity and mystical thought, or perhaps it was her interpretation of Plato and the ancients that helped her view Jesus Christ and Christianity in such a way just as it did the Gnostics. Plato was very influential in mystical philosophy especially for early Christianity. One of the most important concepts that Plato deals with, according to Weil, is love and it is said that she carried the original Ancient Greek version of the Symposium with her to work at the fields, often reading and explaining it to other workers (Rozelle-Stone & Davis, 2025).

According to Plato in the Symposium, eros, or passionate love, is a desire for the eternal and the good (Weil, 1958). Weil saw this idea as being closely linked to her own belief in the value of attention and the need to seek the good of others. Plato also suggests in the Symposium that true love involves a willingness to give everything up for the sake of the beloved and to seek goodness above all else. Weil emphasizes this idea of self-sacrifice in her own philosophy of love, her thought relies on the importance of self-effacement and unconditional love, especially the love of God despite anything that may be logically argued against such love (Weil, 2003, p. 28).

The Symposium is unusual among Platonic dialogues because it lacks a dialectical argument throughout the work and has a limited role, despite the fact that the various speakers often disagree with each other (Warner 1979, pp. 329-30). Also, it is important to note that Plato delivers the famous speech through Socrates, but he says that the words and the teachings belong to Diotima, a priestess from Mantinea who taught him about the "art of love" (Plato, 201d). The use of rhetoric in this dialogue can be seen as an example of the "noble rhetoric" that was introduced in the Gorgias and further in the Phaedrus which is controlled by dialectic and concerned with truth but is able to adapt to the needs of a particular audience in order to persuade through means beyond dialectical argument. In the latter part of the dialogue, Plato also incorporates a commentary by Alcibiades that reinforces Diotima's conclusions about love through its practicality.

⁴ Translated as *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* by Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler.

Simone Weil has a different approach to the text than the traditional interpretation and likens the literary structure and style to Aeschylus' tragedy Prometheus and suggests that this is quite obvious when the two works are read one after the other in their original Greek (Weil, 1958). This is because the love that is described by Aristophanes in the Symposium is similar to the love that is felt by Prometheus in Aeschylus' tragedy: Love that is the subject here is, according to Weil, the "Son of God" or "the egg of the World" (Weil, 1958, p. 106). She not only compares Prometheus to the Christ but also suggests that Socrates is Silenus, the "attendant of Dionysus," the same Dionysus that she compares to Osiris, "the god whose passion was celebrated, the judge and savior of souls, the Lord of the truth" (Weil, 1958, p. 107). In this sense, Socrates, through Weil's Plato, is the companion of the protector of truth whichever name is attributed to the said protector, in our case: Jesus Christ.

2. Metaxu

One of the most important concepts that Weil wrote about is *metaxu* which she finds the foundation of in Plato's works. The literal meaning of the word *metaxu*, regarding a place, is, in the midst, betwixt, between, while regarding a time, between, meanwhile (Liddell et al., 1889). Plato uses the term in several dialogues, most plainly in *Symposium* 202d, where Diotima calls Eros a daemon positioned between gods and humans. Simone Weil draws on multiple Platonic images of mediation: the cave allegory (*Republic* 514a-517a) in which the released prisoner links the cave's interior to the outer world, the ascent to the forms in *Republic* VI-VII where philosophical intellection bridges sensibles and intelligibles, the myth of anamnesis in *Meno* 81b-86b where the soul connects embodied experience to pre-bodily knowledge, and the account of the tripartite soul in *Phaedrus* 246a-257b where reason guides appetites toward the divine. Weil also groups these strands under the concept she names *metaxu*.

Simone Weil, inspired by the theme of intermediaries in Plato's works, uses the concept of *metaxu* to explain various relationships and links between human beings, things and most importantly God or other divine beings. In her notes, she describes the concept as the true way of reaching God, because these connections can also serve as "barriers", or they can serve as food for our souls (Weil, 2003, p. 145-7). For example, the bridges that Greeks used are not known to us in the present time because while they were intended spiritually, we treat them materialistically. The only way that we can discover the true purpose of such bridges is to love God "with a supernatural love" so that we may see "means simply as means" and nothing more Weil (2003, p. 146).

For example, power and "money, power's master key" are means at their purest form and thus they are perceived as ends rather than simple means by some oblivious to the truth (Weil, 2003, p. 146). Instead, suggests Weil, we must see that the world we are in is a "realm of necessity" and it "offers us absolutely nothing except means" (Weil, 2003, p. 146). On the other hand, there is contradiction in human desires as with the desire to eat when hungry, for instance, subsides once we are full, but desire can also serve as a way to reach the supernatural if one were to experience the supernatural even once. Therefore, desire is evil in nature, and it fools us into going the wrong way but without desire we would not have the

motivation to search for higher experiences and in the end reach the divine. When used as a means, desire can help us grow and develop. If one were to be too exhausted to even desire, it would be impossible for them to ever reach the divine let alone illusory pleasures. When desire is aligned and its axis is fixed, the *metaxu*, which “*form the region of good and evil*” feed the soul in the manner of “*home, country, traditions, culture, etc.*” and without it “*a human life is not possible*” (Weil, 2003, p. 146-7).

Metaxu, the mediators that connect us to the divine, are blessings of the earth for humans. According to Weil, it is only possible to appreciate the *metaxu* of others if we value our own. As an example, if we are to appreciate other countries, we must not view our own country “*as an idol*” but rather a step towards something greater such as God (Weil, 2003, p. 147). In order to be harmonious with the natural world, our faculties should be free, independent and from a single foundation. Here, Weil is a proponent of harmony with nature as were the Greeks in ancient times, as was Plato’s philosophy borrowed from the Pythagoreans. Plato’s idea of specialization, according to Weil, referred to the specialization of human faculties, connecting the spiritual and acting as a bridge, or *metaxu*, yearning for a higher purpose beyond itself. With this notion in mind, the Greek civilization did not share the common adoration of force and instead used the temporal *metaxu* as a bridge: “*Among the states of the soul they did not seek intensity but purity,*” meaning that they did not try to conquer others or nature but find ways to live in harmony – this of course is valid in the mystic teachings of the Greeks and may not be the common sense of the tyrants for example. The idea that Weil is trying to convey with the idolatry here is also further explained in her notes as coming “*from the fact that, while thirsting for absolute good, we do not possess the power of supernatural attention and we have not the patience to allow it to develop*” (Weil, 2003, p. 60). On the other hand, she believes that idolatry is a necessity in the cave because without an idol one works in the void where one turns to “*false gods.*” Idolatry again is related to the concept of force, in the sense that it is a double-edged sword, a weapon that goes both ways but may be avoided if true aims and actions are utilized.

The concept of *metaxu* provides a valuable analytical tool for examining the ethical dimensions of mediation in communication. All communication relies on intermediaries – language, cultural norms, social structures, technological platforms. Weil's framework encourages a critical assessment of how these specific *metaxu* function ethically. Do they serve as bridges, facilitating understanding, connection, and access to truth and goodness? Or do they operate as barriers, creating division, fostering misunderstanding, promoting superficiality, or becoming objects of idolatry?

Contemporary digital platforms, for instance, function as powerful *metaxu*. A Weilian analysis would ask: Do social media algorithms encourage patient attention or fleeting distraction? Do they foster genuine connection or echo chambers and polarization? Do they serve the human need for truth or facilitate the spread of misinformation? Similarly, organizational structures, news framing conventions, and even educational systems can be analyzed as *metaxu*, evaluated according to whether they nourish or starve the “needs of the soul” – order, liberty, responsibility, equality, truth, security, etc.

Weil's warning against idolatry is particularly pertinent here. It cautions against treating the means of communication (e.g., technology, media institutions, rhetorical techniques) as ends in themselves, obscuring the ultimate goal of seeking the good and connecting authentically with others. This perspective mandates that communication ethics extend its scrutiny beyond message content and communicator intent to encompass a critical evaluation of the ethical implications embedded within the very structures and tools of mediation.

3. Attention

Simone Weil's concept of attention is one of the foundational ideas of her philosophical pursuit. Attention, in its literal meaning comes from the Latin *attendo*, "I wait for, I listen carefully, I pay attention" (Lewis & Short, 1879) which is essentially the same in French, attention in the sense of mental focus, vigilance, consideration, interest. The concept in regard to Weil's understanding may be seen as a sort of *meditation* where the mind focuses on a particular thought. Weil in her notes speaks of how geniuses do not *try* to find a solution, but the solution of a problem comes to them in a state of complete attention that is effortless and without worry, this she calls *extreme attention*: "Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious. The amount of creative genius in any period is strictly in proportion to the amount of extreme attention and thus of authentic religion at that period."

Weil believes that we do not need to understand new things but by patience and attention, the truth will seem evident to our whole self (Weil 2003, p. 116). This method is the only way to cure "*faults*" as opposed to the will. The way to virtue, poetry or the solution of a problem should not be to try with extreme will at all costs and push ourselves but the calmer approach of attention an absolute example of which is prayer that is guided by faith and love (Weil 2003, p. 117). This method is opposed to devotion with a clear object that takes over the whole pursuit and is a misguided way to reach the truth. The only way to utilize attention is to desire without an object. This thought is similar to the Buddhist understanding of removing oneself from attachments of all kinds. Weil suggests the same, where one should not be focused on the object of desire through will but the object which should be the idea of good itself through unmixed attention. To this Weil adds as we have seen from her analysis of the *Symposium*: "*Love is the teacher of gods and men, for no one learns without desiring to learn. Truth is sought not because it is truth but because it is good*" (Weil, 2003, p. 118). Attention is connected to desire but instead of will by "*consent*" as discussed regarding Prometheus and his actions before. Through this consent, attention enables one to be able to liberate oneself from the 'I' as it disappears and all our attention may turn "*to that which cannot be conceived*" otherwise (Weil, 2003, p. 118).

However, the concept of attention should not be regarded as a mere method of learning or education because it is a practice of ethics and spirituality in totality. Attention is vital in all aspects of human life, not only for understanding ideas but also for empathy with others in regard to the essential needs of the soul. Attention is also the way to realize the nature of *metaxu* in the path to reaching the divine. The practice of attention is only possible if one is able to endure the difficulty and affliction that comes with such supernatural truths, which is why attention must

be rooted in love and faith so that one may pass by all the suffering and attachment of beings and things that gravitate one toward the earth instead of heaven. Weil believes that turning our attention towards the good, God or to a lesser degree something absolutely beautiful will prevail against evil in the end. As long as this is the case, the individual will not need to fear because the realization alone will grow the eternity in the soul like a seed if one takes care of it (Weil, 2003, p. 119).

Weil's concept of *attention* offers a radical deepening of practices central to communication ethics, such as 'active listening', 'audience understanding', 'striving to understand', and the 'attentiveness' highlighted in care ethics. While these concepts often focus on cognitive comprehension or behavioral skills, Weilian attention signifies a more fundamental ontological and spiritual orientation. It is a discipline of suspending the self – its judgments, desires, and preoccupations – to create a receptive space for the reality of the other to emerge.

Applied to communication practice, this perspective could transform how we approach various interactions. In conflict resolution, it moves beyond strategic listening for weaknesses or points of compromise towards a genuine attempt to perceive the other's underlying needs and suffering. In healthcare communication, it elevates empathy beyond a professional tool towards a state of being present to the patient's vulnerability and experience. In intercultural dialogue, it demands a suspension of ethnocentric assumptions to truly encounter the perspective of the culturally different Other. Even in journalistic interviewing, it suggests a shift from purely instrumental information gathering towards recognizing the full humanity and dignity of the interviewee.

Crucially, Weil's framework posits attention not merely as a desirable communication skill but as the *pre-condition* for genuine ethical interaction. Without this capacity for radical openness and self-suspension, communication risks remaining superficial, manipulative, or simply failing to connect with the other in a meaningful way. It grounds the possibility of ethical communication in a particular way of *being* before focusing on the specifics of *doing*.

4. God as the Other Within

The concept of the Other is never explicitly titled or subtitled in Weil's works. However, this does not mean that the concept itself is apparent in her thought. God is even referred to as just another being or an individual in some of her explanations, of course not to be seen as a mere being but a being or of course the being. It must be first established however silly it might seem that Weil considers the existence of God, there is a God, and in the manner of Cartesian reasoning there is also a self that is the 'I' whether that would be the 'I' writing this or the 'I' that represents Weil thinking about this in the past. No matter, there is an 'I' and another 'I' or the divine 'I' which is God. God would perceive 'I' who is writing this as another, something other than God's self and same goes for the individual that contemplates the existence or the very being of God as well. According to Weil, or rather Weil through Plato, these two beings are able to connect through a concept which has been established as *metaxu*. What was also mentioned but not completely analyzed was the concept of *décréation* which makes for a very interesting argument regarding the nature of God and the reason of human existence as well.

Weil presents a distinct view on love: she states that God can only love Himself. In contrast, humans can only love others, lacking the inherent capacity for self-love. This capacity, Weil suggests, is only achievable through God. Consequently, God loves us as an extension of His own self-love, because we are His creation (Weil, 2003, p. 32). Weil's argument against a pantheistic theory of creation is that there exists a deifugal force, as mentioned before, because "otherwise all would be God" (2003, p. 33). Again, in her notes, Weil claims that God renounced being everything, thus the reason for creation and the need for human *décréation*. This means, logically that God is not everything at the moment, also meaning that we are other to God as God is other in regard to us. However, this logical thinking again is rejected by Weil saying that "everything which is grasped by our natural faculties is hypothetical. It is only supernatural love that establishes anything. Thus, we are co-creators. We participate in the creation of the world by decreasing ourselves" (Weil, 2003, p. 33-4). From this line we understand that Weil means that what God has created as humans, we should decreate and join God again. This is similar to the Buddhist idea of letting go of attachments in the manner of ourselves or rather having an ego death that was also what Plato describes in some of his dialogues as established before according to Weil. *Décréation* is a way of opening up space for the divine, for grace to enter our being and move us beyond our reason, to a supernatural experience that will open up new knowledge that we may have never been able to reach otherwise. Thus, God is the ultimate Other or the "eternal Thou" similar to what Martin Buber describes in his work *I and Thou* (Buber, 2010).

This view of God as the Other but connected to us or us connected to God from within through various *metaxu* helps see our capabilities, limitations and needs as human beings as well as setting a mysterious path to the divine. This way of thought not only grounds the reason for ethics in Weil's view but also grounds the reason for the nobility of the pursuit of knowledge and the necessity of work and religious connection since all of these things assist the bridges that connect us to God in the end. It is also why there is evil in this world, as a response to the famous problem of evil, because God is not this world nor is God nature, God is simply the divine Other that shows humanity the way but does not intervene directly in the thoughts and actions of human beings since they are also established as necessary for the soul's development according to Weil. Though the concept of the nature of God is not properly defined or explained by Weil, nor so clearly by Plato and rather cryptically, because this is the intention of Weil's endeavor in philosophy. She accepts the fact that there are things that are outside of reasoning and philosophical understanding, but she does not deny the way to reach them as opposed to Kant. Weil truly believes that there is a way to reach beyond the mind's capabilities, and it is only through mystical experiences and divine love. Weil believes this because she claims she experienced it and says that it is not something open to be described in writing but gives us an idea through fragments in order for us to be inspired to take the same route.

However, there is still an inconsistency regarding God as the divine Other as proposed by Weil. On the one hand, she claims that God absolutely transcends the physical world and impossible to be grasped by human intelligence: God is distinct from creation in the sense that God does not desire, desire being a human characteristic. On the other hand, Weil claims that God is always present and feels

the suffering of humanity, and at one time he even sacrificed himself as the Christ and walked the earth, that God is reachable through metaxu, through love, affliction, and empathy. These two polar views in her thought may be present in any Catholic mystic who advocates the reality of the Trinity, and that Jesus Christ is one aspect of God along with the Holy Spirit and the Father who is in heaven, but Weil's detailed analysis of the formulaic journey of reaching the divine give way to more questions than solutions. To these contradictions, Weil argues that they are the only way to determine whether something is real or imaginary, as discussed before. Such view of contradictions blocks the way to further arguments and discussions as they are one of those mechanisms that enable the owner of the argument to escape logical scrutiny and reminds us of the paradoxical sayings of sophists present in Plato's works. It is claimed by philosophers of religion that even God cannot take part in a logical impossibility hence the definition such as a sphere square or a triangle with two points. However, God is never described regarding capabilities or limitations in Weil's works. Simply anything that may seem impossible for us is possible for God as it is in Matthew 19:26. If however, all things are possible with God then that would mean conditional love would be possible for God or evil would be possible for God which is completely rejected by any Catholic including Simone Weil since the very definition of God as a supreme being is that God is the absolute good, and absolute good is devoid of evil. To this, Weil responds by saying that evil and good are not opposites but simply exist on different planes meaning that evil can only exist on earth guided by gravity and the absolute good is only possible in heaven because God is absolutely good. However, we are not presented with the extent of such limitations as to where such a line would be drawn regarding the separation of earth and heaven. These thoughts, again, lead to many cliché, paradoxical and pseudo-philosophical questions such as the question of when exactly a sand dune may be called a sand dune.

Weil's conception of God as the ultimate Other, transcendent yet paradoxically accessible within the soul through love and attention, provides a theological framework for grappling with alterity, a central concern in dialogic ethics, particularly Levinas's work. Both Weil and Levinas challenge communication theories predicated on achieving consensus, perfect understanding, or the reduction of difference to sameness. They insist that ethics begins precisely in the encounter with that which is radically different from the self.

Weil's perspective suggests that the ethical demand arising from the human other is grounded in, or resonates with, the ultimate Otherness of the divine. This framework pushes communication ethics to acknowledge the limits of rational comprehension and instrumental communication when faced with profound difference or suffering. The idea of the 'Other Within' implies that responsibility towards the external other is simultaneously a response to an internal, perhaps divine, imperative. While the explicit theology presents challenges for secular discourse, Weil's mystical perspective can still inform discussions of alterity. It emphasizes the irreducible mystery inherent in the other person, cautioning against attempts to fully grasp, categorize, or control them through communication. It suggests that ethical communication involves respecting this mystery, approaching the other not as a problem to be solved or a resource to be utilized, but as a presence to be attended to with reverence and love.

5. Contemporary Communication Ethics and Weil

The field of communication ethics has evolved significantly in recent decades, moving beyond a purely rule-based approach to embrace relational and dialogic perspectives. Scholars have noted a “dialogic turn” in communication ethics; an orientation that seeks to meet, learn from, and negotiate with difference rather than impose universal rules (Arnett et al., 2006). This turn is influenced by thinkers like Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, who place the ethical center on our encounter with the *Other*. Buber’s philosophy of dialogue insists on meeting the other as a *Thou*, with genuine presence and mutuality, instead of an objectified *It* (Buber, 2010). Levinas goes further, asserting that ethics begins with the face of the Other commanding us, our responsibility to others is infinite and precedes any formal reasoning (Lévinas, 1969). In contemporary communication ethics scholarship, these dialogic ideas translate into a commitment to listening, openness, and responsiveness in communication. Ethical communication is understood as a two-way dialogue grounded in respect for the Other’s alterity. This means that rather than starting with predetermined moral principles, communicators are called to approach each interaction with humility and a willingness to learn from others’ perspectives. Importantly, however, few theories explain how one can attain the level of selflessness required to truly meet the Other without ego or prejudice. Here is where Simone Weil’s insights provide a profound complement: her concepts of attention and *décréation* describe the inner transformation necessary to realize dialogic ethics in practice.

Contemporary dialogic ethics emphasizes responsibility to the Other as an ethical starting point. For example, Levinas inspired scholars argue that ethical communication means being endlessly responsive to the needs and calls of others, essentially placing the Other’s interest above one’s own (Arnett et al., 2006). This aligns closely with Weil’s notion that real love “seeks only the good of the other” (Weil, 1958, p. 88). Both Weil and dialogic ethicists underscore that authentic dialogue requires suspending the self in order to genuinely hear and respond to another. Buber (2010) describes this as entering a dialogical relation where one’s whole being meets the other’s being; Weil’s term *attention* captures a similar state of radical openness. When Weil writes that “absolutely unmixed attention is prayer” (Weil, 2003, p. 116), she anticipates what communication scholars now call mindful presence or deep listening. In practical terms, a communicator guided by Weil’s ethics of love would approach interactions devoid of self-interest, a daunting ideal, but one that dialogic ethics also upholds in principle. Weil’s process of *décréation* offers a spiritual-ethical method for achieving this radical other-centeredness: by making space within oneself, the person becomes able to receive the other’s words and needs transparently. Contemporary ethics of dialogue acknowledges the importance of decentering the self (Jensen, 1997) but often lacks a language of how to do so. Weil provides that language in terms of spiritual practice, effectively bridging secular dialogic principles with a disciplined inner work of humility. Her example suggests that ethical dialogue is not merely a technique, it is a way of being, cultivated through attention and love.

Another major strand in contemporary communication ethics comes from the ethics of care and feminist ethics. Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) have argued that ethics is fundamentally about caring relations, attentiveness to

particular others and commitment to meeting their needs. In communication, this translates to empathic listening, sensitivity to context, and building trust in relationships. Noddings (1984) describes caring as requiring engrossment in the other's reality and listening as an essential act in moral life. We see this emphasis echoed in health communication ethics and counseling, where practitioners are urged to communicate empathy, validate patients' feelings, and respond to individual needs with compassion. Simone Weil's understanding of love as "a force that compels us to seek the good of others" resonates strongly here. Weil not only anticipates the ethics of care, but she also intensifies it. Her insistence on equality undergirds the care perspective that no one's need or suffering should be ignored. Moreover, Weil's unique attentiveness to suffering enriches contemporary ideas of compassion. In fields like intercultural dialogue or conflict communication, scholars note the importance of acknowledging historical suffering and vulnerabilities to truly care for the Other (Kwame & Petrucka, 2021; Bianco & Lykes, 2023). Weil suggests that one should be able to ask the other what they are going through and that this recognition is vital in her understanding of ethics of love (Weil, 2009, p. 115). She claims that this is an attentive way of looking at the other, emptying oneself ready to receive the being one is looking at. Weil's perspective thus provides a normative depth to care ethics: not only should we care in communication, but our discourse is ethical only when it actively conduits the other's good, even at cost to ourselves. This dovetails with the care ethics notion that responsiveness (rather than abstract principle) is the measure of morality, reinforcing that love in action is the highest criterion for ethical discourse.

Classical approaches to communication ethics often emphasized universal principles such as truthfulness, fairness, and justice in dialogue (Habermas, 1990). For instance, Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics proposes that communication should be governed by rational norms (honesty, equal participation, non-coercion) so that the best argument wins. While these principles are important (and do somewhat resonate with Weil's reverence for truth), they appear impersonal or insufficient when dealing with concrete human situations. Weil's philosophy offers a bridge between principled and relational ethics. She agrees that untruthful or manipulative communication is morally bankrupt; for Weil, illusion and falsehood are forms of wrongdoing because they impose our will on reality or others. Weil says that truth first because God is truth and anything that is not grounded in love cannot be truth even if it seems truthful. For example, in social and political communication ethics today, there is much debate about speaking responsibly, balancing the need to tell the truth about injustice with the need to do so in a way that does not dehumanize or harm. Weil provides a clear criterion grounded in love. Only if an act is rooted in love, it is ethically justified; if it is driven by ego, contempt, or domination, it is not, even if the content itself appears truthful. This insight is especially relevant in an era of sharp public discourse and cancel culture. It challenges communicators to examine their motives. In essence, Weil's ethics of love injects moral intentionality into contemporary norms of truth-telling and justice-seeking. It reminds us that ethical communication must be measured by how it contributes to the good defined by Weil as that which supports the soul's flourishing and respects the other's humanity.

One of the most striking contributions Weil offers to modern communication ethics is her concept of *attention* in the midst of the digital attention economy. Today's communication environment is saturated with information and competing messages, often engineered to capture and commodify our attention (Williams, 2018; Wu, 2016). Social media platforms, for example, operate on business models where user attention is the product being sold to advertisers. This economic drive has ethical consequences: algorithms maximize engagement by promoting sensational or emotionally charged content, which can erode users' capacity for patient, deep attention and contribute to echo chambers and polarization. Studies have noted that social media use has been linked to increasing societal divides and reduced empathy, as people become trapped in feedback loops that reinforce their views and shorten their attention spans (Sunstein, 2017). In this context, communication ethics scholars voice growing concern about the loss of listening and genuine dialogue online. The challenge of our time is how to maintain mindful, empathetic communication when technology and media constantly pull our attention in fragmented directions. Simone Weil's writings on attention seem almost prophetic here. She warns against the wrong use of intermediaries (*metaxu*) and idols that capture the soul (Weil, 2001). In modern terms, we can interpret these *false gods* as the digital distractions and hyper-stimulating media that keep us from seeing others clearly. Weil asserts that *attention* is the rarest and purest form of generosity (to truly give someone our attention is to give them our time, our presence, and our self, without distraction or agenda). This is precisely the antidote to the ethical problems of the attention economy. Applying Weil's thought, contemporary communication ethics would urge individuals and media systems alike to protect and prioritize attention as a moral good. For example, designers of communication technology could take guidance from Weil by asking if the tool fosters patient attention and meaningful connection instead of exploiting base attraction and compulsiveness. The ethical use of communication media, from a Weilian perspective, involves deliberate practices of focus and consent to attend. Choosing to fully attend to one person or issue at a time, despite the myriad temptations to multitask or scroll endlessly. In interpersonal terms, it means treating the person in front of us (or the voice on the other end of the line) as sacred, resisting the pull of our phone notifications or internal prejudices. In organizational and public communication, it means creating spaces for long-form dialogue and reflection, rather than reducing everything to catchy soundbites. Ultimately, Weil's elevation of attention to a quasi-sacred status reinforces a growing consensus in communication ethics: that without attention, no ethical dialogue is possible. Her work supplies both a philosophical rationale and a spiritual motivation to counter the forces of distraction, arguing that attention is a moral duty and an act of love.

Contemporary communication ethics also wrestles with the balance between expressing oneself and ethically responding to others. Modern society often prizes finding one's voice, especially for groups who have been silenced or marginalized, speaking up is a crucial part of justice. Ethical communication, therefore, involves empowerment and voice as much as listening. Simone Weil's concept of *décréation*, the voluntary effacement of one's ego, might seem to stand in tension with this imperative of voice. If misapplied, Weil's call to self-empty could be interpreted as asking people to stay silent or yield to domination, which would be ethically

problematic. However, a closer reading of Weil shows that *décréation* is not an erasure of the self's true voice, but rather the removal of egoistic falsehoods so that truth and justice can speak through us. Weil cherished truth-telling and stood firmly against oppression in her own life; her self-emptying was meant to let divine love (or the highest good) work through her as an instrument. In applying this to communication ethics, we might interpret *décréation* as an invitation to purify our voice, instead of silencing it. It encourages communicators to strip away vanity, selfish motives, and thirst for power in their expression. What remains is a voice attuned to conscience and empathy, a voice that can advocate powerfully for others rather than for self. In practical terms, this aligns with contemporary ideas of ethical advocacy and allyship in communication. For example, in social justice movements, allies are often urged to step back and listen to those directly affected, effectively decentering their own ego, so that marginalized voices can come to the fore. At the same time, those who have been voiceless may find, through attention and grace, an authentic voice that speaks through them, guided by a higher call (what Weil would call the divine voice within). Communication ethics today strives to honor both the need for voice and the need for listening. Weil's philosophy suggests these are not contradictory: attention and expression are two sides of enacting love in communication. By emptying the ego, one's words become more truthful and compassionate. Thus, *décréation* can be seen as a process to achieve ethical purity of voice, a genuine response to the other and to the call of justice.

In a mediated world, much of our communication is carried by technology, from smartphones to mass media. Contemporary communication ethics therefore also analyzes the ethical implications of mediators, the channels and institutions through which we connect. A key question is whether these mediators serve as bridges that connect people to truth and to each other, or as barriers that distort and divide. Today's scholarship looks at phenomena like echo chambers, filter bubbles, and misinformation in media. Do our communication channels enhance mutual understanding, or do they isolate us? For example, news algorithms that curate content can either broaden one's perspective or narrow it, depending on whether they expose us to diverse views or just reinforce our biases. From a Weilian viewpoint, these are deep ethical issues. Weil's concept of idolatry, treating a means as an end (a Kantian thought), warns us that media and technology can become idols if we fixate on them for their own sake rather than using them as simple means for good. When a social media platform prioritizes advertising revenue over the well-being of its users, it effectively turns a bridge into a barrier; it becomes an idol demanding our attention at the expense of our moral and spiritual health. Communication ethics calls for critical evaluation of such practices. Weil would have us examine every *metaxu* by how it contributes to or detracts from love. If a particular medium or message form leads us to see the humanity in the other, it functions as a true bridge. If it leads us to see others as less than human, it has become a false god, demanding corrective action. The practical upshot is that ethical communicators today must be vigilant guardians of the space between. They should strive to design, choose, and employ communication channels in ways that mediate goodness: facilitating understanding, attention, and dialogue. In this effort, Simone Weil's clarity can guide us. We must constantly reorient our use of communication tools toward serving the needs of the soul and refuse to idolize the tools themselves.

Conclusion

Bringing together these threads, contemporary communication ethics increasingly recognizes that beyond specific duties or outcomes, there is a need for an overarching virtue or standard to guide communicative conduct. Simone Weil offers love, precisely, as such a standard. While scholarship may not always use the word love, parallel concepts are gaining traction, like compassionate communication, empathetic listening, dialogic responsibility, and civility rooted in respect. What Weil contributes is a bold assertion that love (understood as willing the good of the other) is the core criterion of moral discourse. This idea challenges us to evaluate all communicative acts under a simple ethical question of whether communication serves love. What Weil adds to contemporary communication ethics is a unifying vision: no matter the context, the moral worth of communication lies in how it transcends the self and meets the other's vital needs. This provides a much-needed normative anchor in a pluralistic world. Communication ethics as a field often grapples with relativism. Weil does not deny context, but she boldly maintains a universal understanding. In practice, this means that even as we respect diversity and difference, we can assert that a communication practice failing to respect the humanity of others is ethically deficient.

In conclusion, the contemporary understanding of communication ethics with its emphasis on dialogue, care, alterity, and social responsibility, finds a powerful ally and guide in Simone Weil's ethics of love. Her ideas illuminate the path to actualize the lofty ideals that communication scholars promote. Weil challenges us to cultivate the inner disposition (attention, humility, compassion) that make ethical communication possible. She also challenges modern institutions and technologies to align with the primacy of the human soul's good. By relating love to every aspect of discourse, from interpersonal interactions to the structures of media, Weil provides a coherent, spiritually enriched vision of what ethical communication can be. In a world of noise, fragmentation, and self-promotion, her call for radical unselfish attention is both counter-cultural and urgently needed. It reminds us that at its heart, communication is not just about exchanging messages or winning arguments. Communication is about encountering the other and recognizing a life as valuable as our own. Communication becomes a sacred act when performed with such love. In practice, this might demand personal sacrifices of time, ego, and convenience, but as Weil's life and writings attest, those sacrifices are the cost of truth and grace in human relations. Contemporary communication ethics, when enriched by Weil's understanding, thus dares to reclaim the moral and even spiritual dimension of communication: guiding us to speak, listen, design, and engage in ways that uphold the dignity of others and foster the good in a fractured world.

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