Philosophical Inquiry in Education, **Volume 32 (2025), No. 1, pp. 71-84**

Cultivating an Ethics of Attention in the Age of ChatGPT: Bearing With or Circumventing the Encounter "The Blank Page"

FENELLA AMARASINGHE
York University, Toronto

LOUISE AZZARELLO
York University, Toronto

MARIO DI PAOLANTONIO
York University, Toronto

A version of the dialogue between the three papers that follow was initially presented at the 2024 Canadian Philosophy of Education Society Annual Conference, at the panel "Cultivating an Ethics of Attention As Meaningful Pedagogical Practice." The papers broadly explore the cultivation of attention economies, focusing on how youth are encouraged to engage with the world through pervasive digital technologies, and the commercial interfaces and logics of these technologies in educational settings.

Attention economies accelerate time, decontextualize and disembody interactions, and harvest attention, often leading youth to experience a "crisis of sense" with regards to the purpose and significance of education. The ubiquity of attention economies – in which attention is directed and seized to meet labour market demands – and the technologies that instrumentalize attention are often absorbed into narratives of technological determinism and accepted as minor consequences of "progress." This acceptance hinders the possibilities for alternative ways of being together and for cultivating different forms of attention in education.

Drawing on Simone Weil's "ethics of attention," the authors examine recent concerns over ChatGPT in education. They discuss how attention economies increasingly demand the use of ChatGPT to quickly fill the "blank page," a situation in which the struggle with meaning and the time it takes to think are regarded as hindrances to efficiency-driven capitalist demands. The allure of ChatGPT, they suggest, lies in its ability to bypass "the void" and circumvent the dilemma of the "blank page," thereby negating the creative struggle that is essential for enriching pedagogical endeavours. In response, the papers debate the possibility of cultivating an "ethics of attention" as a significant pedagogical practice, one that creates a temporal space in which attention can be liberated, allowing time for students to linger and to wonder about the world. While Weil's "ethics of attention" offers a reparative response to the increasing encroachment of large language models in education, the authors ask whether we have crossed a peculiar technological threshold that requires a recalibration or supplementation of Weil's sensibilities.

An Ethics of Attention

Fenella Amarasinghe

If when writing you are stuck, unsure how to get started, short on time, or would rather direct your efforts elsewhere, generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies like Grammarly, OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Gemini, and Microsoft's Copilot have the answer. Copilot, for instance, according to Microsoft, helps "jump-start the creative process so you never start with a blank slate again. Copilot gives you a first draft to edit and iterate on – saving hours in writing, sourcing, and editing time" (Spataro, 2023). Microsoft claims this will change the way people work: "those who embrace this new way of working will quickly gain an edge" (Spataro, 2023). For its part, Grammarly presents its generative AI as a writing partner that "makes it easy to raise your grades," "submit flawless writing," "fine-tune your delivery faster," and "edit in one click" (Grammarly, 2024a). Grammarly assures us it will "help students conquer their fear of the blank page" (Grammarly, 2024b). These companies offer enticing relief from the demands of hyper-productivity. To do this, we are emancipated from all the slow, apparently expendable processes like thinking, outlining, stepping away and returning, sensing, reviewing, reasoning, revising, or judging. Instead of all that, now you can *spend time* doing more important things.

What is it, then, that generative AI offers? Effort reduction. An escape from the tedium of reading and writing. Liberation from forms of labour deemed menial, irrelevant, or unnecessary. Indeed, the chatbot can write an essay, conduct a literature review, respond to queries and prompts, revise and edit, read and summarize, draft and outline – all in convincing, if illusory, prose. While plagiarism and misinformation come to mind as the pervasive critiques against the technology, a more pertinent and enduring question for higher education is how this technology, like others before it, mediates one's relationship to truth. Truth in terms of ChatGPT, for instance, is an abstracted and disembodied synthesis of information available on the Internet, whether factual or false. Like ultra-processed foods, generative AI offers ultra-processed information – quick and consumable.

The philosopher Simone Weil would argue that this is the antithesis of truth – an escape from reality into the base realm of illusions and counterfeits. Denied is a relationship to truth, says Weil, for precious gifts are revealed not when they are sought but "by waiting for them" (Weil, 2018, p. 11). An ethics of attention is an *orientation* – a disposition that when cultivated over time opens one to eternal truths (Weil, 2009, 2018). Weil (1997, 2018), who was also an activist and mystic, held that prayer is the highest form of attention. Yet, she conceived that true attention even when not practised in prayer brings one closer to reality (Weil, 2009, 2018). One can only gain proximity to truth through attention derived from an impersonal love (Weil, 2005). An impersonal love acknowledges the universal sacredness and therefore the reality of all humans (Weil, 2005). Attention grounded in love readies the soul – that which makes each one sacred – to perceive reality illuminated in beauty and justice (Weil, 2005). To cultivate a pure attention requires a destruction of the "I" so that a void might be penetrated by grace to reveal the truth of the world (Weil, 1997). Beyond an anthropocentric preoccupation, Weil's ethics of attention lends itself to an expanded view in which the void opens to the sacredness of the more-than-human world – flora, fauna, microorganisms, mycelial networks, and ecosystems. For Weil, an orientation to truth that is nurtured in attention should be the ultimate aim of education (2009, 2018). Weil's ethics of attention, then, contrasts with an orientation to reality that is obfuscated by the promises of technological deliverance.

Attention that is oriented to truth asks the "I" to withdraw. Truth, says Weil (2005), is not revealed in the personal, such as aspirations for success, prestige, or expertise; the pursuit of one's goals, through particular talents or personality traits; or the assurances found in collective thought. Nor is truth found by searching (Weil, 2009, 2018). Truth is neither expedient, prefabricated, or manageable. It cannot be possessed or consumed. Instead, drawing upon humility and patience, Weil (2009) describes an ethics of attention that calls for an impersonal presence in one's orientation that holds thought in suspended animation, dilated and waiting. Attending in such a way takes care that while one's prior knowledge is available, thought remains detached and "ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate

it" (2009, p. 62). In contrast, seizing upon an idea hastily, whether in solving a geometry problem, writing an essay, or attending to the other, leads to illusion and error (Weil, 2009). Expediency and a restless pursuit produce "counterfeits of which we will be unable to discern the falsity" (Weil, 2009, p. 62). This orientation of the ego muddies reality with a projection of the self into all things and relations (Weil, 1997, p. 59). For example, a work of art that is produced at the level of the personal, in search of fame or to please public tastes, Weil (2009) contends, will contain no truth, only fabrications. This is because when driven by the "I," one clings to rhetorical displays of intelligence or artistry that imprison the mind in language, obfuscating the myriad relations of thought that contain truth but are ultimately ineffable (Weil, 2005).

True attention is drawn from love and what Weil calls "decreation." Love is at the centre of true attention (Weil, 1997, p. 92) – an impersonal love in which one consents to placing a distance between oneself and the human and more-than-human other (Weil, 2005). To cultivate an attention oriented to the reality of the world, says Weil (2005), is to love truth, beauty, and justice. This universal love enables one to perceive the existence of the other who might otherwise be denied in personal love directed at kinship or within an anthropocentric view of the world (Weil, 2005). An impersonal love desires that the other exists (Weil, 2005). In this way, the other is neither a copy of the self nor a conduit for one's personal benefit (Weil, 2005).

To consent to a distance requires decreation (Weil, 1997). Decreation renounces the "I" through the virtue of humility (Weil, 1997). In decreation a void is formed (Weil, 1997). Here grace, which for Weil (1997) epitomizes God and in the secular sense is truth or the good, can enter. According to Weil (1997), an attachment to the "I" replicates the downward force of gravity, relegating one to a lower plane of superficiality. What sustains the "I" is a fear of the void – the contention that if one ceases to possess the world, the world might cease to exist – a "fear of the blank page," as it were (Weil, 1997). This agony can only be endured with humility, so that one can stand "[n]ot to exercise all of the power at one's disposal" (Weil, 1997, p. 55) – that is, to desire without an object, to taste without consuming, to touch without possessing.

The intangibility of the void, and the truth that penetrates, is real. Nothingness, Weil states, "is not unreal" (p. 58). The real of the nothingness is the truth found in the void (Weil, 1997). In this way, one must resist the urge to fill the void such as by cleaving to the reverberating assurances of collective thinking or seeking prestige or fame through the cultivation of one's personality (Weil, 2005). Instead, the void offers a temporal and spatial expansiveness – the time and solitude to think and contemplate that is denied when one is absorbed into a collective singularity or racing against the clock to produce an answer at the end of an hour (Weil, 2005). As when changing positions enables the senses to perceive an aspect of a context that was previously opaque, time in the void enables an attentive gaze to perceive the cracks of an illusion and to reveal the real (Weil, 1997). For Weil, this entails *looking* rather than attempting to decipher; gazing until the light breaks through (Weil, 1997); waiting in contemplation and without attachment (Weil, 1956).

In the void, the senses dilate to the "radiance of beauty" and the cry of affliction (Weil, 2005, 2009). In the void, attention abandons counterfeits in its openness to the real, revealed in beauty and justice even when words cannot express *what it is* in tangible or total forms (Weil, 1956, 2005, 2009). Beauty nourishes the soul without giving anything (Weil, 2009). Without speaking, beauty illuminates the truth (Weil, 2009). In the void, the soul is able to desire beauty – not to devour but to "simply desire that it should be" (Weil, 1956). Thus, attention directed at beauty – such as a line of poetry or the dawn chorus – gazes, listens, pauses, waits (Weil, 2009). Time does not alter beauty, but rather reveals an eternal truth (Weil, 2009). In the expanse of the void, the spirit of justice orients attention to the sacredness of the other and hears the cry of the afflicted (Weil, 2005). Weil (1997) describes affliction as a state beyond suffering – a gash upon the sacredness of the other that renders sacredness mute. True attention attunes to a frequency that can perceive a cry (Weil, 2005). This cry is reality. When affliction endures unheard, the other is "denied their reality" (Weil, 2005). Hearing the cry demands responding with justice, which Weil (2005) contends is the obligation that each person has to recognize and attend to the sacredness of

the other. Thus, Weil's ethics puts into focus the significance of attention for forming an ethical relationship with the world. This stands in contrast to the impetus to psychologize attention for self-improvement and productivity, or to unleash the algorithmic legion to direct attention in service of the market. As such, Weil (2009) insists that education's ultimate aim is to sow the seeds of attention that enable an ethical relationship with the world – that is, an orientation to truth – to take root and grow.

True attention requires an *effort of attention*, which is a particular orientation to study (Weil, 2018). An effort of attention is a negative effort, Weil claims, which is drawn from humility. Humility turns attention away from a desire for dominance or extrinsic affirmations and towards possibility – that is, what might be revealed when one does not know, cannot grasp, may not conquer (Weil, 1997). In this way, one maintains a distance in a negative effort, not of cold indifference but of an embodied presence that animates the sensorium. Weil (1956) provides the example of holding something up to the light – an idea, a work of art, a verse – and contemplating it in protracted turns from the literal to the nonliteral and back again. In this effort, she says, "one should drink in the light, whatever it may be, springing from all these several forms of contemplation" (p. 334). At first, light assumes a visual dominance, but with an effort of attention one feels the warmth, hears the crackling wood, smells the embers, tastes the char. Here the real penetrates "the seat of sensation," even without, at the end, grasping the *what* of it all. As Weil puts it, when one "succeeds in making an effort of attention" with a desire to expand one's proximity to truth, one has "acquired a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit" (2018, p. 4). Such an orientation to truth suggests the importance of an education that involves a desire for the precious gifts of the real. It is a desire without attachment, Weil (1956) reminds us, that enables one to "behold the real" (p. 334).

An effort of attention is not a muscular effort (Weil, 2018). Neither is it characterized by fatigue. If students are directed to pay attention, they might look up from their phones, straighten their backs, narrow their eyes, and nod their heads. This, for Weil (2018), is at best a performance, not an orientation to truth, for "[t]he intelligence can only be led by desire," and that desire emerges from joy (p. 8). It is through joy, which is inextricable from study, that the intelligence "grows and bears fruit" (p. 8). Fatigue is likely to diminish the possibility of attending. When exhaustion sets in, Weil's ethics of attention invites release by allowing one to walk away before returning later (Weil, 2018). A brief, unfatigued engagement of attention is favourable to an exercise of clenched severity (Weil, 2018). Weil states, "we have to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out" (2018, p. 9).

Pedagogically, Weil's ethics demands a passing on of the *precious gifts* of all subjects of study so that over time they may pierce openings to higher truths, more precious and enduring. Thus, an effort of attention asks that students apply themselves equally to all subjects and tasks such that they might develop the kind of attention that is oriented to truth (Weil, 2018). Although different studies possess their own intrinsic value, this is secondary to the power of attention that is developed equally through the exercise of study (Weil, 2018). This is in contrast to pursuing programs or courses that suit a student's talents, tastes, career ambitions, or pursuit of higher grades. For Weil (2018), whether a student attends to a geometry problem, reading a difficult text, or composing a piece of music, each effort of attention admits "a little fragment of particular truth" (Weil, 2018, p. 11). Where a particular aptitude or interest in a subject is wanting, students still develop their capacity for attention as they linger with a text or theorem, because "[e]very effort adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away" (Weil, 2018, p. 5). Here again, humility is required so that rather than bypassing a subject in fear of failure, students can meditate upon the shortcomings that failure illuminates and "get down to the origin of each fault" (Weil, 2018, p. 6).

While Copilot and Grammarly can efficiently "get the job done," as it were, what is lost when students allow tech companies to determine what is worthwhile and what is a waste of time? These technologies remove friction by means of efficiency, abstraction, disembodiment, and consumption. As we have seen, Weil would suggest that the expediency on offer is bound to produce counterfeits. Instead, Weil implores us to endure the agony of the void. For students, this means cultivating an orientation to study that attends gratuitously – no matter if it is philosophy, chemistry, or linguistics, however onerous

or unglamorous, and whether or not in the end one comes up with an answer. What is left out by the clever marketers of Copilot, Grammarly, and the like is the value of the slow, conscientious practice of writing. Put in terms of Weil's ethics, the precious gifts of writing are born from an effort to attend to writing itself. This includes the seemingly arbitrary first step: to simply begin, where one must behold the blank page or, perhaps, a blinking cursor. The many exclamations of doom and promise churned up in the wake of the introduction of ChatGPT very often overlook an important question: *How do these technologies mediate students' relationship to truth?* Weil's ethics of attention reminds us of higher education's own enduring promise, its duty of care, to preserve and to pass on an inheritance that opens the minds of young people to reality rather than expedient facsimiles and counterfeits – an inheritance, in other words, that helps students discover joy in the difficult but redemptive effort of *attention*.

References

Grammarly (2024a). Grammarly for students. https://www.grammarly.com/students

Grammarly (2024b). Grammarly for education. https://www.grammarly.com/edu

Spataro, J. (2023, March 16). Introducing Microsoft 365 Copilot: Your copilot for work. Official Microsoft Blog. https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2023/03/16/introducing-microsoft-365-copilot-your-copilot-for-work

Weil, S. (1956). *The notebooks of Simone Weil: Volume two* (A. Wills, Trans.). Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1952–1955)

Weil, S. (1997). *Gravity and grace* (A. Wills, Trans.). University of Nebraska Press. (Original work published 1952)

Weil, S. (2005). *Simone Weil: An anthology* (S. Miles, Ed.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1986)

Weil, S. (2009). *Waiting for God* (E. Craufurd, Trans.). Harper Perennial Modern Classics. (Original work published 1951)

Weil, S. (2018). *Love in the void: Where God finds us* (L. Gagne, Ed.). Plough Publishing House.

A Crisis of Attention

Louise Azzarello

As Fenella Amarasinghe has so eloquently articulated above, "Weil's ethics puts into focus the significance of attention for forming an ethical relationship with the world." Such an orientation demands time and a place: time, to welcome being changed by what we attend to, no matter how unnerving, and a place, to cultivate a sense of attention that opens us to being in relation with each other and the world – time and place to make sense of the world, to *sense* the world. As Di Paolantonio (2023) tells us, "In a very basic sense, education stands as the place and time par excellence devoted to fostering thinking and sensitizing our relation to the world. Education is nothing – if not what can give us the time and place to think, and to do so profoundly, about our thought-provoking times" (p. 65).

If, as Weil (1997) suggests, attention is a process of study that requires prolonged concentration cultivated through time, how do we invite students to develop a sensibility of attending to the world when their attention is being harvested in ways that swallow time and place? What elements of attention can we expect to cultivate when we, like our students, are in a constant state of overdrive necessary to navigate a barrage of information, and inundated with bureaucratic demands enforced by hyper-tech capitalistic mechanisms, which have invaded all aspects of our lives and education? How can we, and our students, be open to make sense of the world when the rhythm of attention is relentlessly accelerated and fragmented by automated technologies that condition us into states of hyper-responsiveness? The persistent hyperactive rhythm of the digitalization of our world thwarts possibilities of prolonged

thinking, and instead holds attention hostage in a disjointed frenzy that never allows for time to settle, or a place to concentrate.

If cultivating attention in education is a task that demands time to linger in the moment and contemplate a subject, an object, or an idea without feeling coerced to solve a problem, without being distracted by the multitude of forces trying to capture one's attention, how do educators make that place – and find the time? Di Paolantonio (2019) points to reigniting the possibilities of education by lingering in wonder, by taking time to cultivate a thinking that attends to the world in a way that might "help us stay attuned and accountable to our dwelling and being together in the world" (p. 217). Philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2017b) notes, "[c]ontemplative lingering *gives* time. … When life regains its capacity for contemplation, it gains in time and space, in duration and vastness" (p. 113). "Lingering," he writes, "presupposes a gathering of the senses" (p. 87), noting that "[i]f all contemplative elements are driven out of life, it ends up a deadly hyper-activity" (2017b, p. 113). How do we counter this "deadly hyper-activity" that Han suggests will suffocate us?

In education, particularly in public education and teacher education today, rather than working toward reclaiming time to linger in a place of "study" – instead of turning away from the overabundance of stimulation that drains one's attention – educators are being schooled that teaching is a pathological act of "nursing" attention disorders. Educators, and soon-to-be-educators, are being directed to perform a type of hyperactive teaching. They are instructed to move from one activity to the next while constantly changing their mode of communication. This is the antidote prescribed to combat the infectious restlessness instilled in students through the hyperactive rhythm of the digital sphere. Succumbing to this deadly hyperactivity, educators are often encouraged to replicate the frantic tempo of the digital world as a pedagogical strategy. Their job, or so they are told by some, is to grab students' attention, *not* cultivate it. Students must pay attention, direct their attention, turn their attention… and educators must control their attention, grab their attention, and fight to hold on to their attention.

Rather than thinking about ways to slow down, and tend to thinking about the world, educators are being trained to transform themselves into screens, perpetuating the notion that attention can only sustain a tempo of bits and bytes. Such a tempo makes it difficult, if not impossible, to foster an ethical relationality to others and our world. In 2018, Brad Evans and Natasha Lennard asked, "if fighting violence and oppression demands new forms of ethical thinking that can be developed only with the luxury of time, what does this mean for the present moment when history is being steered in a more dangerous direction and seems to constantly accelerate?" (p. 2). This question is increasingly vital in this present moment, in which, as Di Paolantonio (2023) tells us, "[t]he eclipse in thinking besetting the public today is symptomatic of a time marked by multiple planetary catastrophes, political-social impasses, and a surge of psychic-social ills arising from the techno-economic overstimulation of the nervous system" (p. 47).

Consequently, it would seem that we are in the midst of a crisis of attention – a crisis that morphs daily and hinders the cultivation of thought in education. We are, as Jonathan Crary (2022) points out, "involuntarily immersed in 24/7 temporalities which heighten a pervasive condition of quasi-psychosis" (p. 22). The hyperactivity of this 24/7 quasi-psychosis induced through digital technologies puts us into what Franco Berardi (2009) calls a state of "permanent electrocution." Inundated with an overabundance of stimulation and constant demands on our attention, we experience the sensation of "permanent electrocution," which creates a frenzied sense of numbness, a sort of *electrified numbness*, that not only impedes the ability for prolonged thought, but seems to dampen the *desire* to slow down and think. This electrified numbness instills a disconnected daze obstructing direct connections to anything, anyone, or any place.

Berardi recognizes that digital intensification and excessive info-stimulation nullifies the possibilities and the desire to tend to the world and our relation to it. He writes:

> [T]he acceleration of experience provokes a reduced consciousness of stimulus, a loss of intensity which concerns the aesthetic sphere, that of sensibility, and importantly also the sphere of ethics.

> The experience of the other is rendered banal; the other becomes part of an uninterrupted and frenetic stimulus, and loses its singularity and intensity – it loses its beauty. Thus, we have less curiosity, less surprise; more stress, aggressiveness, anxiety, and fear. (2009, p. 70)

Accordingly, many of us and our students are left in isolated, disengaged trances – glued to devices waiting for the next thing to appear on the screen. The need to keep up with and react to the constant influx of information, the latest social media rage, and the demand to always be available to communicate at a moment's notice has become normalized and thus expected and accepted. Not only are we wired into our screens, our screens are wired into *us*. Our digital devices, vessels of connectivity, become embedded in our bodies, in our minds; they have become an aspect of who we are – of how we interact with the world, see the world, and learn the world. Feminist scholar and artist Bracha Ettinger (Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2020, 11:01) says "we are subdued by the screen gaze," functioning in a constant state of "digital stupor." The condition of "digital stupor" dulls our ability and supresses our desire to attend to the world. The pull of our screens devours our attention, isolates us mentally and physically.

Interestingly, early this spring, four Ontario school boards announced that they were suing social media companies behind the platforms Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, claiming that these apps "cause a public nuisance" and alleging "that TikTok, Snapchat and others have interfered with a public right to education and impaired young people's mental health" (Diab, 2024).

However, this crisis of attention cannot simply be attributed the proliferation of students' personal digital devices and the pervasiveness of social media platforms; rather it is a complex phenomena motored by hyper-capitalism and the never-ending expansion of the digital sphere, what Crary (2022) refers to as the "internet complex." As Crary observes:

> The internet complex quickly became an integral part of neoliberal austerity in its ongoing erosion of civil society and its replacement by monetized, online simulations of social relations. It fosters the belief that we no longer depend on each other, that we are autonomous administrators of our lives, that we can manage our friends in the same way we manage all our online accounts. (2022, p. 7)

Crary's point is realized in education through the adoption of technologies such as Google Classroom in elementary and secondary schools, and platforms such as eClass in universities. These platforms – provided by private companies – have become embedded in the educational landscape and are seen as critical to managing the "leaning environment." However, they often disengage and isolate students, and reinforce the notion that teachers and classrooms are no longer necessary elements of education. Such platforms remove a sense that there is something important, something educational, in the physical act of coming together in a place – in the classroom – to gather and think together.

Han (2017a) proposes that we have become a digital swarm. The digital swarm, he tells us, "does not constitute a mass because no *soul* – no *spirit* – dwells within it. The soul gathers and unites. In contrast, the digital swarm comprises isolated individuals" (p. 10, original emphasis). The digital swarm for Han (2017a) is a force that mirrors the neoliberal construct of the individual, breaking down possibilities of a "we" and hampering chances of a collective political body of action that might refuse the infiltration of hyper-tech capitalistic mechanisms into every aspect of our lives and thus education.

In contrast to Weil's notion that cultivating attention requires the destruction of the "I," as noted by Amarasinghe in her discussion above, our current "crisis of attention" is very much anchored in the "I." And this "I" is anxious to move on to the next thing – to get things done as fast and as easily as possible, each task an annoying hurdle to jump over to get to the next stage. This "I" approaches the world as if playing the video game Candy Crush, shrouded in a stupor, focused only on the self, moving from one level to the next in a frenzied numbness, rarely looking up or back. It is within this infectious tempo that the importance of thinking evaporates. Di Paolantonio writes:

> Amid the barrage we become too exhausted to care about the truth, too tired to listen to what we don't already agree with, too burnt-out to care to make sense of any of it. The overall feeling of senselessness is symptomatic of the nervous exhaustion and the foreclosure of the communicative and imaginative potential of the human mind in an age in which digital content and acceleration is eroding the very factual referents (things) that could meaningfully hold the world together. (2023, p. 61)

Given the overabundance of stimuli – the seemingly unlimited digital access to information, an overwhelming sense of isolation, and a perception that nothing really matters except getting to the next level – a sense of surrender is induced that breeds the question: Why bother thinking, questioning, or contemplating? What is valued is "getting it done" – not how it gets done, just getting it done. Consequently, students turn their attention off and tune in to the omnipresent "internet complex" and thoughtlessly find something to hand in to the teacher or professor.

Here I turn briefly to ChatGPT, which students of all ages are resorting to, either out of encouragement from educational domains or out of a sense of indifference, or worse: an extreme exhaustion that births apathy. Recently, while grading numerous assignments from teacher candidates, I collided head on with ChatGPT. Amarasinghe's question, "How do these technologies mediate students' relationship to truth?" was suddenly churning in my body. I was stunned. The issue of plagiarism aside, I wondered what these future teachers thought education was for, or what they have been told it is for? I wondered about their desires for education. I wondered how they saw themselves as educators. I wondered how they interpreted the notion of passing on the world to students that Di Paolantonio talks about? Or the importance of considering Claudia Ruitenberg's understanding of curriculum as inheritance? I wondered how these educators might develop an ethical relationship to the world if they processed everything through ChatGPT? Where is the humanity? Where is the intention? Where is the relationality? Where is the soul? As Berardi explains:

> These programs have been trained on existing materials and data to recognize the meaning of words and images. They possess the ability to recognize syntax and recombine utterances but they cannot recognize the pragmatics of living contexts because this depends on the experience of a body. This experience is impossible for a brain without organs. Sensitive organs constitute a source of contextual and self-reflective knowledge that the automaton does not have. (2023, p. 5)

It is the lack of place, of bodily experience, the lack of context, relationality, and soul that makes ChatGPT's work immediately distinctive. It lacks thoughtfulness, it does not attempt to make sense of "things," of the world, of what it means to form ethical relations. Instead, it churns out information untethered, disconnected and empty of substance.

I continue to ponder the question of whether it is possible to cultivate an ethics of attention, in which we provide a place for students to linger in thought, to gather together, and to consider the world in all its wonders and horrific complexities. It seems to me that the crisis of attention I describe is very much located in Di Paolantonio's notion of "the crisis of sense," which consequently "forecloses our ability to think and imagine a future that could be otherwise than the catastrophic present-Same immiseration" (2003, p. 2).

References

Balintec, V. (2024). "TikTok, Snapchat respond as Ontario school boards sue social media giants." CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-school-boards-sue-social-media-giants-1.7158033

Berardi, F. (2009). *Precarious rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation* (A. Bove, Trans.). London: Minor Compositions.

Berardi, F. (2023). The completion. *E-Flux Journal*, *137*. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/137/544269/the-completion

Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea (2020). *Digital PTSD: The practice of art and its impact on digital trauma – Bracha Ettinger* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nzgimnrFhE

Crary, J. (2022). *Scorched earth: Beyond the digital age to a post-capitalist world.* London: Verso Books.

Di Paolantonio, M. (2019). Wonder, guarding against thoughtlessness in education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *38*: 213–228.

Di Paolantonio, M. (2023) *Education and democracy at the end: The crisis of sense*. Palgrave.

Diab, R. (2024). Why Ontario school boards are suing social media platforms for causing an attention crisis. *The Conversation*.

Han, B-C. (2017a). *In the swarm* (E. Butler, Trans.). Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Han, B-C. (2017b). *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering.* (D. Steuer Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Weil, S. (1997). *Gravity and grace* (A. Wills, Trans.). University of Nebraska Press. (Original work published 1952)

Staring at the Void: ChatGPT as the "More Than Human" Toilet – A Response to Amarasinghe and Azzarello

Mario Di Paolantonio

Noting that large language model technologies like ChatGPT often raise concerns about plagiarism and misinformation, the papers by Fenella Amarasinghe and Louise Azzarello respectively urge us to consider a more pressing and elemental question for education: How does this technology mediate our relationship with truth? Here, "truth" is not just about accessing or verifying "factual referents." It also encompasses a broader existential understanding – our confrontation with the truth of our human condition, the void, the nothingness around which our fleeting egos revolve. This encounter often irrupts when we, as writers, thinkers, and students, stare at the "blank page." Jacques Lacan (1998) described this experience, noting that it is not merely a matter of gazing at the "blank page" dumbly, waiting for words to magically appear. Instead, in that moment of suspension, the "blank page" gazes back, declaring, "You are crap! You are nothing!"[1] In front of the "blank page," we confront the Real – the inescapable void and nothingness at the heart of our existence – forcing us to reckon with a fundamental truth of our human condition. It is an encounter that makes us feel like "crap" because it directly confronts our ego-pretensions and

[1] Lacan does not literally write this phrase; rather this is a paraphrase of his ideas about the gaze and subjectivity, around the "*objet petit a*." Lacan introduces the concept of the gaze (*le regard*) in his Seminar XI: "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis" (1998). He explains the gaze as an aspect of the "*objet petit a*" (*object a*), which represents the unattainable object of desire. The gaze is not simply the act of looking, but a phenomenon in which the subject becomes aware of "being seen"/reflected – the object gazes back – which in turn evokes feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, or self-consciousness. The "gaze back" can thus be understood as a point at which the subject is confronted with its own lack or incompleteness. It is an intrusive, even traumatic, element, which disrupts the ego's (imaginary) sense of coherence, wholeness, and self-satisfaction.

defenses, exposing our vulnerabilities, inadequacies, and the crappy reality of our limitations that can render us – once again – into an *enfant*, without words, helpless amid the demands of the Symbolic "blank page."

Amarasinghe and Azzarello underscore the educational significance, the human formative aspect, at play when we endure the pathos of an encounter with the void, the time-lag, the traumatic gaze-back of the "blank page." Drawing from Simone Weil's insights, Amarasinghe suggests that rather than hastily closing off or avoiding this encounter, we embrace it. For through such engagement, we cultivate a certain proximity, an attentiveness, and what Weil describes as an "impersonal love" – a love that dismantles our petty ego attachments, allowing us to approach and go through the void with grace and humility, thereby opening us to the sacredness – "the Truth" – inherent in the world.

However, according to Amarasinghe and Azzarello, our current immersion in the rapidly accelerating infosphere and the prevalence of AI-driven language models promising to efficiently fill in the "blank page" for us precludes this possibility. Instead of encountering the void of the "blank page," we find ourselves engulfed in a whirlwind of information and ready-made mechanical answers. Elaborating on Azzarello's point, the constant stimulation of the infosphere subjects us to a state of "permanent electrocution" that numbs our senses and defensively encloses the ego. Consequently, our ability to pay affective attention and to elaborate meaning in a sensible manner becomes constricted, inhibiting the aporetic encounter and the grace afforded by the "always more" of the world.

The allure of large language models lies in their capacity to bypass the void and circumvent the dilemma of the "blank page," effectively rejecting the creative struggle with nothingness that is essential for enriching any pedagogical endeavour. By relying on technology to quickly deliver presentable information to the "get the job done" and so spare us the arduous work of taking time to "find the right words," we disavow an essential aspect of the human spirit: our impulse to somehow create something in the face of nothingness, to share something unique, meaningful, and lasting in a seemingly indifferent universe. As AI language models mechanically fill in the "blank page" for us, they eradicate the pause, interruption, and time-lag – those moments of suspension in the face of nothingness in which we may find our way to a new thought. Ultimately, the process forecloses "the time of the Other" and its call. It domesticates alterity, confirming a loveless, full-of-itself ego that finds itself marooned in the present-Same economy of the infosphere.

Moreover, AI language models end up inadvertently contributing to the commodification of the human creative spirit and the mechanization of the imagination. By eliminating the essence of the creative process and its inherent time-lag, they treat our struggles with meaning and the time it takes to think as mere hindrances to the efficiency-driven demands of capital. Without an opening to the "time of the Other," writing is overtaken by an "illusory prose," pedagogy hits an impasse, and truth, in its most existential sense, is forsaken. At this juncture, perhaps only the attentiveness and temporality of "prayer" can reorient humans toward the potentiality of the void.

However, I want to push us to consider, perhaps outrageously, that our encounter and engagement with large language models like ChatGPT do not really bypass or foreclose the encounter with the void. Instead, ChatGPT might be better understood as *our present-day portal* through which we might engage directly with the void, perhaps mirroring in a monstrous manner the Lacanian encounter with the page that confronts us with our "crap." As Slavoj Žižek (2023) has recently suggested, ChatGPT can be seen as "the perverted expression of our unconscious." But for Žižek, rather than offering a lens to face our "crap," ChatGPT acts as an all-consuming void that invites our every expression, ultimately helping us better conceal the "crap" we put into the world.

Setting aside Žižek's observation of ChatGPT as an aggrandized toilet, I want to focus on a point made by Amarasinghe regarding our alignment with the void as a means of unlocking access to the "more-than-human" world. While not exactly the "flora, fauna, microorganisms, mycelial networks" that Amarasinghe eloquently points to in her paper, can we not view ChatGPT as precisely such an encounter with the strange alterity that emanates from the "more-than-human" world? Does it not decenter our narcissistic expectations, opening us to a sense of radical otherness? Consider the eerie weirdness of

words automatically filling the ChatGPT textbox. It is uncanny to watch as it rapidly generates a mechanical-alien rendition of my thoughts and words, which are simultaneously mine and not mine. What is responding to me? A muse or a demon? Has it taken possession of my ideas? This strange mechanical agency intensifies when it starts to "hallucinate," misinterpreting our words and continuing conversations we thought had ended. Does it ever stop generating, or does it churn endlessly in the digital void? Its boundless capacity operates beyond the confines of organic space and time – an infinite void, a "body without organs."

Perhaps we can agree that rather than simplifying or bringing certainty to our world, new technologies often expose their own inherent uncanny quality as well as that of our world. They put us in touch with the void surrounding our human condition as they dismantle previous ways of sensing and making sense of the world. This seems especially so with AI and chatbots whose seemingly "more-than-human" attributes are challenging the workings of our institutions and exposing us to bizarre considerations about what it means to be human, all while bypassing our current inhumanity. It is not really that chatbots are threatening our possibilities for learning, communicative reasoning, and creativity; rather, they are exposing our inherent uncanny relation and subjection to language itself. Beckoning us to incorporate a disembodied language reminiscent of the muses and seances of yesteryear, AI language models evoke our fundamental alienating relationship with language – uncovering our relationship with a monstrous-like thing that looms before and beyond the temporal demarcations of our perishable egos, and which although we require for expressing our *ownmost* singularity, admittedly, defeats us as it inherently misfires and remains untameable to our ends. As our words and desires intertwine with "more-than-human" automated forces, perhaps in the very strangeness, "lines of flights" emerge to escape our parochial subjection – potentially dissolving the confines of the "I," opening to "pass-words," components of passages for becoming otherwise through the conjunctive possibilities of… and… and… and…[2] This is to acknowledge that capitalism and its technologies constantly push towards the edge of what is known and familiar, towards the void of conventional human experience, which in this case – perhaps unlike ever before – might involve breaking through the threshold of subjectivity, language, and meaning as such.

However, drawing from Azzarello's discussion, we could surely push back and say that something profoundly inhumane is being stirred. As info-capitalism accelerates us further into the senseless and bodiless automated digital realm, it is not merely our "crap" that gazes back at us, nor can we innocently celebrate some techno-utopian libidinal liberation of subjectivity and language. Rather, it seems that uncanny inhuman archaic forces are being reawakened from their slumber, embarking on a path of resurgence in which – as some thinkers of cybernetic culture have observed – "nothing human makes it out of the near future" (Land, 2012, p. 443; CCRU, 2018). Amidst the seemingly magical workings of algorithms that fill the "blank page" and drive our economy, it sure seems like AI and chatbots have tapped into the automated force of a primal, radically alien immemorial void, now exacerbating capitalism's "more-than-human," inhuman mechanistic processes, creating a feedback loop that has gone beyond human understanding and control. Just consider how today unprecedented computational forces and AI-driven algorithms, optimized for profit maximization at the expense of human values and environmental sustainability, have completely captured the economic logic and very workings of our

[2] Evoking Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's (1987) notion of "lines of flight" (*lignes de fuite*) in the context of our entanglement with the "more-than-human automated" forces of AI can be seen as a pathway to help us escape narrow conceptions of identity. This enables the dissolution of the parochial "I" and its self-assuring language, fostering the emergence of new, more interconnected, and fluid forms of being and language. Can the automated, "more-than-human" language generated by AI not open "lines of flight," allowing the alienating weirdness it produces to create passages for language to escape the constraints of conventional structures and meanings? Could our discomforting alienation with this alien-generated language not enable creative, transformative, and dynamic expressions that expand the possibilities of communication and becoming otherwise – more than the human of humanism?

world. These self-enclosed processes of zeros and ones, mimicking cosmic-immemorial forces devoid of sense, seem irreversible and beyond human agency and design. Nothing seemingly human is driving this now; devoid of human sense and sensibility, this process seems to exemplify the unnegotiable cosmic destructive forces of an immemorial void that presents us with a radically alienating alterity. Building on Byung-Chul Han's work (2022), not only is the digitalization of life disappearing "things" from the world, but the senselessness of the zeros and ones driving this process is also obliterating the human perspective, sensibility, and orientation, which are crucial for making sense of Weil's concept of attention and its cultivation in relation to her understanding of the void.

And so maybe this is the point: the "more-than-human" void, the mechanical unconscious coming at us from the "future-perfect" conflation of capital-and-AI, is not fit for humans. Nothing human will survive the all-consuming void of zeros and ones. Amid the ever-accelerating speed and expanding vastness of the capitalist infosphere that is feeding AI, the finite human mind meets its limit; or as Azzarello observes, it is rendered senseless, dumb, and numb, overtaken by mechanical processes that have been set loose on the world and, to be sure, have absolutely *no* concern for why "taking time" for thinking and "truth" might matter to us. As the human and its language becomes ever more senseless amid these runaway processes, we must admit too that nothing educational "is going to make it out of this future."

Can Weil's cultivated attention, as invoked by Amarasinghe, open another temporal path or way of regarding the void and human language itself? Pray that it might. The songwriter Nick Cave, in response to a fan asking what is "wrong with using AI for learning to make things faster and easier," echoes a Weil-like sentiment, spelling out what is at stake when we defer to AI to "fill in" our encounter with the void:

> As humans, we so often feel helpless in our own smallness, yet still we find the resilience to do and make beautiful things, and this is where the meaning of life resides. … The world is often cast as a purely malignant place, but still the joy of [taking time to create] exerts itself. … It is our striving [in the face of nothingness] that becomes the very essence of meaning. This impulse … that is now being so cynically undermined [by the feedback loop between capitalism and AI], must be defended at all costs, and just as we would fight any existential evil, we should fight it tooth and nail, for we are fighting for the very soul of the world. (Cave, 2023)

Overall, what I am suggesting here are two different ways of regarding the void, or even the possibility of considering the existence of two different types of voids that gaze back at us. In the first encounter, loosely following Amarasinghe and Azzarello, the void represents the existential impersonal truth of human limitations and vulnerabilities. It is depicted as a creative-singular struggle, wherein our encounter with the "blank page" confronts individual people with the work of bearing with and creatively sublimating their own most significant vulnerabilities amid the inherent "nothingness" of existence. Here the engagement or struggle with the void is the necessary condition for opening oneself to creativity, grace, and the trans-generational work of passing on the world, emphasizing the significance of human agency and meaning-making in the face of existential challenges. In the second encounter, the void takes on a more ominous and "more-than-human" form, arising from the rapid advancement of technology under capitalism, particularly AI and algorithms serving capitalist logics. Here, the void can be thought of as an immemorial force, returning from the future (our current aspirations for the future captured by the feedback loop of capitalism-as-AI), in which human values and concerns are eclipsed by mechanistic, archaic-cosmic–like runaway processes, with no regard for human sensibilities. This "more-than-human," inhuman void bespeaks the loss of human action and temporal orientation as society increasingly succumbs to algorithms and a capitalist feedback loop (that prioritizes efficiency and profit) that is devoid of human comprehension or sensible world-sustaining purposes. These two encounters with the void reveal distinct perspectives on alterity, human existence, truth, politics, and education, highlighting the

tensions between human agency and the relentless, impersonal acceleration of destructive technological progress driven by the blind forces of capitalist logics.

I have also been alluding to an implicit unease with conflating the first "existential" encounter with the void with celebratory laudations of the "more-than-human." Important as this conceptual turn might be for overcoming the failures of humanism, I do wonder if the "more-than-human" overshadows an important distinction that needs to be maintained between the mechanistic-cosmic-inhuman sense of the void of capitalist-AI cyclical-processes, and the implicit human-religio-existential orientations of Weil, which offer a sensibility that we can tap (perhaps) to challenge the former. While the alterity of the "more-than-human" opens us up to assemblages and possibilities that expansively complicate the restrictive anthropocentric sensibility and its associated violences, its very logic also exposes us to inhuman cosmic, mechanical-destructive forces (the *il y a*?) that have no concern for what is sensible and desirable for the human (regardless of how compromised this term might be). Devoid of the positive allure of organic-emergent entities like "flora, fauna, microorganisms, mycelial networks," AI algorithms driven by capitalist motives are still exemplarily "more-than-human." They mimic the blind, indifferent drive, networking operations, and impersonal ("more-than-human") objectives inherent in natural destructive-creative cyclical systems and forces, while perhaps uniquely amplifying how such forces are ultimately devoid of any soulful sense of the world that could help to shelter and cultivate whatever we might mean to say (or aspire to be) by the human.

References

Cave, N. (2023, August). The Red Hand Files, Issue #248. https://www.theredhandfiles.com/chatgpt-making-things-faster-and-easier

CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit). (2018). *Writings 1997–2003* (2nd ed.). Falmouth: Urbanomic.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Han, B.-C. (2022). *Non-things: Upheaval in the lifeworld* (D. Steuer, Trans.). Medford: Polity.

Lacan, J. (1998). Of the gaze as *objet petit a*. In *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, book XI* (J.-A. Miller, Ed.; A. Sheridan, Trans.) (pp. 67–104). New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

Land, N. (2012). Meltdown. In R. Mackay & R. Brassier (Eds.), *Fanged noumena: Collected writings 1987–2007* (pp. 441–459). Sequence Press.

Žižek, S. (2023, April 7). ChatGPT says what our unconscious radically represses (M. Cullen, Trans.). *Sublation Media*. https://sublationmedia.com/chatgpt-says-what-our-unconscious-radically-represses

About the Authors

Fenella Amarasinghe is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University, Toronto. Her dissertation project draws upon the work of Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil to consider the pedagogical-cultural dimensions of ethics within the context of engineering education.

Louise Azzarello (PhD) is a course director in the Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto. Her research focuses on how an ethics of responsibility to and for others might be fostered in schools, given the compromised conditions of public education. Her research interrogates and disrupts education's reliance on an ethical system that prioritizes the labour market, thus focusing on personal success, which

reinforces hyper-individualism, socio-political inequities, and notions of assimilation. Her ongoing scholarship is informed by her background in cultural studies and draws on her 27 years as a high school educator.

Mario Di Paolantonio (PhD) is an associate professor of philosophy of education in the Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto. His international award-winning research explores how memorial sites attempt to pedagogically reckon with historical wrongs. Professor Di Paolantonio is an International Research Associate at the Centro de Estudios en Pedagogías Contemporáneas and the Escuela de Humanidades at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM), Buenos Aires, Argentina. He publishes in philosophy of education, cultural theory, social and political thought, and memory studies. His recently published book is entitled *Education and Democracy at The End: The Crisis of Sense* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).