

Simone Weil

Catherine McDonald

catmcdonald@iprimus.com.au

Simone Weil

- **Historical Context**

She was born in Feb 1903 and died in August 1943.

**She suffered through the transformation wrought by
industrialization.**

But she never saw the modern world born.

Historical Context



Historical Context



Historical Context



Historical Context

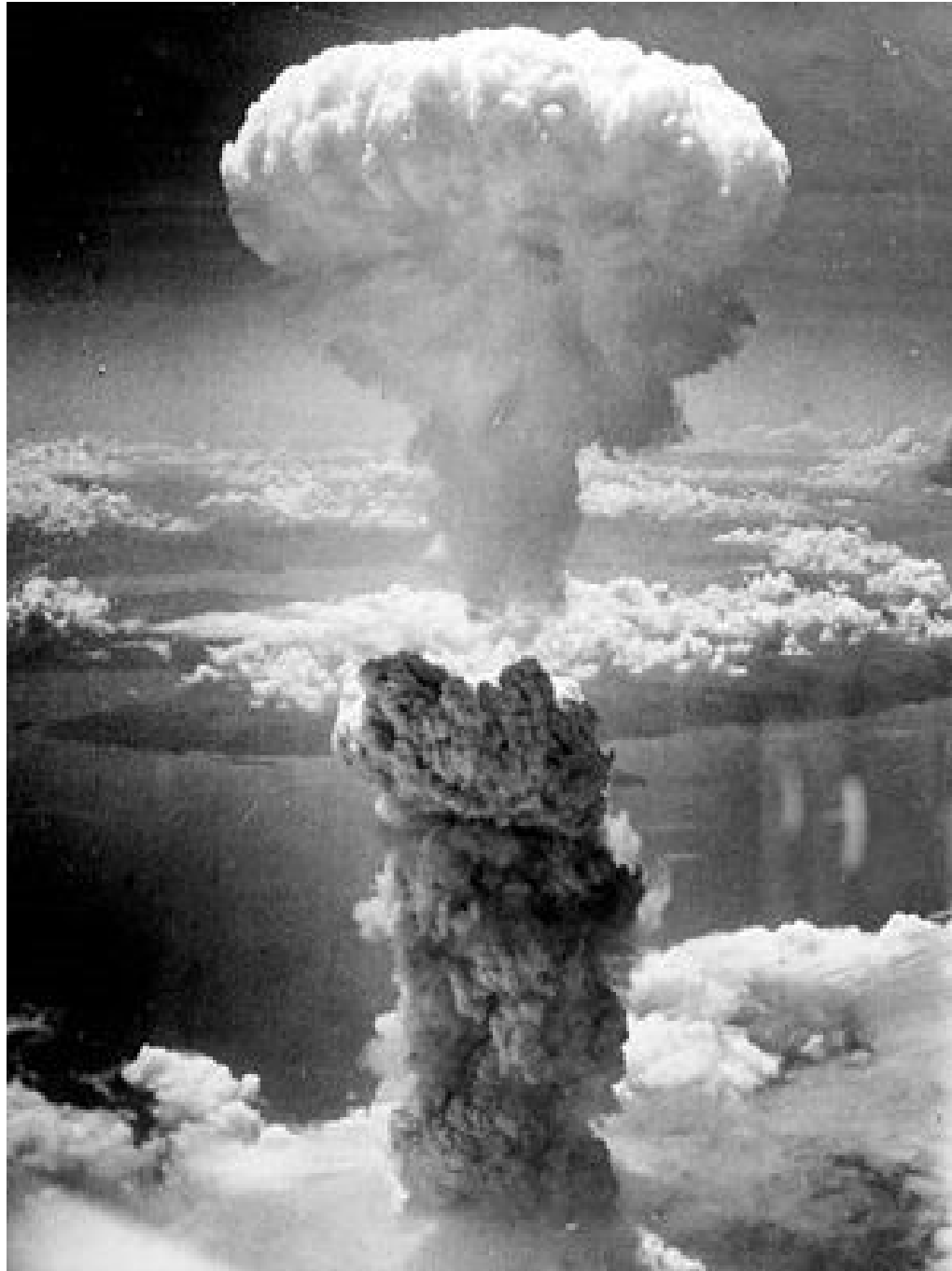


Historical Context

Bergen-Belson



Historical Context



Philosophical Structure

Weil's philosophy can be broadly described as a form of **transcendentalism**.

Transcendentalism broadly is the view that the ultimate good – the foundation of all good - lies outside the material world, outside our everyday empirical experience of the world.

Philosophical Structure

Plato's version of transcendentalism.

The ultimate good resided in the pure forms which were not the everyday objects or acts we are familiar with but the forms that these imperfect versions of the good resemble.

Philosophical Structure

- Kant's transcendentalism

For Kant our knowledge of the good arises from *a priori* principles of reason rather than experience of the world.

“There is a single fundamental principle of morality on which all specific moral duties are based. He calls this moral law (as it is manifested to us) the categorical imperative. The moral law is a product of reason, for Kant, while the basic laws of nature are products of our understanding”

(*a priori* = prior to experience, via deductive reasoning or via intuition)

Philosophical Structure

The Structure of Weil's version of the good.

The good is known *a priori*

The good is universal, objective and unchanging.

Moral obligation takes precedence over the rights.

“A man left alone in the world would have no rights whatever, but he would have obligations.”(4-5)

Philosophical Structure

The Structure of Weil's version of the good.

How do we know that we have such obligations?

Weil is an **intuitionist** who believes that our knowledge of the good arises *a priori*.

“This obligation has no foundation, but only a verification in the common consent accorded by the universal conscience.”⁽⁵⁾

Philosophical Structure

The Structure of Weil's version of the good.

- **A brief digression into means and ends.**

Transcendental views of the good typically have some view to the effect that without an ultimate end, then all values are unjustified.

“There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled and without any recognition of such an obligation ... This obligation is an eternal one. It is coextensive with the eternal destiny of human beings. Only human beings have an eternal destiny...”⁽⁵⁾

Philosophical Structure

The Structure of Weil's version of the good.

What is the good?

Two conditions of the good:

Respect for individuals as human beings, and

The satisfaction of the various needs vital to the human being as a human being.

Both give rise to moral obligations.

Philosophical Structure

The Structure of Weil's version of the good.

General form of Needs

- Antithetical Pairs: Both constitute needs vital for the whole of human good.

“needs are arranged in antithetical pairs and have to combine together to form a balance. Man requires food but also an interval between his meals.; he requires warmth and coolness, rest and exercise. Likewise in the case of the soul's needs.” (12)

Needs are limited

Needs are distinguished from mere desires or wants.

The Needs

The Need for Order This is the most important need

Order is consistency between the various vital needs of body and soul.

Liberty is the ability to choose. Real liberty lays in being constrained by *reasonable* rules that are directed at meeting human needs and by adopting those rules as our own.

An excess of choice as a threat to our liberty.

The Needs



The Needs

- **The need for Responsibility**: the need to show initiative and to be useful.

The world of work: a craftsman has some control a worker has none.

- **The need for Equality**. Equality of opportunity but not as we know it.

Two kinds of social inequality. The inequality of social class and the inequality of competition. They are both equally problematic

Weil's Social Philosophy

- **The future has its roots in the past.**
 - **To go forward or to go back?**
- We owe societies (collectivities) respect because:
 - They preserve the past
 - They are food for the future
 - They are unique⁽⁸⁾