



The Philosophy of Simone Weil. (revised version)

This lecture was provided in support of the VCE philosophy curriculum unit 3, The Good Life, in relation to the work *The Need For Roots* by Simone Weil. I have tried to avoid merely repeating material previously provided through VPSP. The previous material is nonetheless particularly useful for a fuller understanding of Weil's work. It can be found at

<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/vce/studies/philosophy/philosophyindex.html>

First:

The Historical Context of Weil's life.

I want to draw your attention to some of historically significant aspects of her times that can provide a lens through which to read her philosophy.

She was born in Feb 1903 and died in August 1943. This means that she lived and died during one of the most extraordinary periods of recorded history.

She was a teenager during the carnage of the WWI – This was the first industrialised war in human history – it was industrialisation that enabled the mass production of high explosive and the means to deliver it but also a war which was being fought by men whose sensibilities were still those of warriors riding to war on horseback.

This was also the time of the Russian Revolution and the fall of old political orders such as the the Hapsburg and Austria-Hungarian Empires.

It was also the time of the Great Depression of the 1930s. - Even though Europe was not as badly effected as the US, nonetheless even in Europe (and Australia) it was a time of soup kitchens, bread lines and mass unemployment – a time before social security. Hunger was common place and the conditions of work for ordinary working people who had work was often wretched.

Weil was also briefly involved in the Spanish Civil war – the precursor to WWII. As civil wars are want, it was particularly vicious. For a start the forces of the Republic splintered between the Anarchists, the Marxists, and the Nationalists who casually murdered of each other. While the Fascists with the help of the German Nazi government acquired a taste for murdering civilians from a great height. During the Spanish Civil war deliberately dropping bombs on civilians from

planes was still deeply shocking. Ultimately it was a technique perfected by both sides of the conflict during WWII.

The final stage of the world transformation that began with WWI Culminated with the Second world war. Here what Weil did not experience is as important as what she did. She and her family fled France in 1942. Unlike the Existentialists and that other great philosophical French Simone (de Beauvoir) Weil only knew the occupation of France second hand. And then in 1943 she died. She died before the liberation of the first concentration camp – Bergen-Belson. She must surely have known terrible things were happening to the Jewish population but until the liberation of the first camp there were no images and no one outside knew how truly terrible.

Finally, Weil's death in 1943 meant that she never saw that final demonstration of human inhumanity – the exclamation mark that seemed to mark the birth of the modern world as we typically know it. The dropping of the atomic bomb.

For Weil this remarkable backdrop gave rise to work on the nature of force (i.e., violence) I recommend an essay written by Weil *The Iliad, or the poem of force*. Chicago Review, 18:2 (1965) as being particularly interesting in this regard. If you have time you might like to consider her views on force in comparison to those of Nietzsche. Also it gave rise to a considerable amount of writing on the nature of work – particularly on the relationship between the ordinary worker and industrialisation – some of this appears in *The Need for Roots*. Finally we can only wonder what she might have written had she have survived WWII. An interesting contrast to her work might be Primo Levi's work *If This Is a Man* written after liberation from Auschwitz.

General Philosophical Framework and Structure.

Simone Weil's philosophy can be broadly described as a form of **transcendentalism**. This form of metaphysics has a long history in philosophy. So what is philosophical 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.

You will already be familiar with Plato's version of transcendentalism. For him 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. The condition toward which the imperfect versions of the good aim. Roughly we know that there must be a realm of the the perfect form of the good because we recognise the form we typically encounter is imperfect.

However, Plato's transcendental metaphysics is not the only kind and certainly not the only one to have influenced Weil. Her work has clearly also been seriously influenced by Immanuel Kant's version of transcendentalism.

Kant's transcendentalism is vast and very complex. Fortunately we need to understand only a small fraction here. For Kant our knowledge of the good arises from a priori principles of reason rather than experience of the world. (a priori = prior to experience, via deductive reasoning or via intuition)

Thus, “ He holds that 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”¹

¹Rohlf, Michael, "Immanuel Kant", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition)*, Edward N.

The categorical imperative (and you may have encountered this before) comes in a range of versions but broadly it is the command that we: ““act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” And “never act in such a way that we treat Humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself.”

What has this got to do with Simone Weil?

Weil's view of the transcendental nature of the good is most clearly seen right at the beginning of our text where she is discussing obligations. (pages 4 and 5)

For Weil moral obligation takes precedence over the rights. It's doubtful Plato would have understood the concept of rights as we do, and for Kant the moral law is all about obligation.

“A man left alone in the world would have no rights whatever, but he would have obligations.”

For Weil rights reside in the contingent world of facts, they can therefore change. Moral obligations however do not change, they belong to the transcendental.

“Obligations alone remain independent of conditions. They belong to a realm situated above all conditions , because it is situated above this world.”

For Weil (like Plato and Kant) the good is much like the truth. It is universal, objective and unchanging.

“The realm of what is is eternal, universal, unconditioned is other than the one conditioned by facts,....Obligations are only binding on human beings.....All human beings are bound by identical obligations, although these are performed in different ways according to different circumstances....”

Students might like to consider whether there are any circumstances whatsoever in which torturing babies for fun, or destroying the Earth to make way for an intergalactic highway, or... would be morally acceptable. What does this mean about the truth status of the good? Can we have obligations if we are the last person in existence? For instance, would we have obligations to keep our promises to those who no longer exist? Students might like to list the universal obligations that Weil identifies.

How do we know that we have such obligations?

Again like Kant and Plato, Weil believes that our knowledge of the good arises a priori. That is, prior to experience. We don't gain it from examining empirical evidence. There are a couple of reasons for this. One is the one just mentioned. The world of matter changes over time, but Weil believes that the good does not. She also appeals to the universal conscience and common consent.

“This obligation has no foundation, but only a verification in the common consent accorded by the universal conscious. It finds expression in some of the oldest written texts which have come down to us. It is recognised by everybody, without exception in every single case where it is not attacked as a result of interest in passion. ”

It is not entirely clear that Weil can justify appeals to common consent when she has rejected the idea that obligations can be based upon the evidence of this world! Both Kant and Plato rely upon reasoning about means and ends to get to their conclusions.

A brief digression into means and ends.

A useful distinction – between intrinsic and instrumental value. Some things have instrumental value. Money is instrumentally useful but it has no intrinsic value. (the jars of foreign currency that we have – are testament to that. Unless you can buy something with it – money is more useless than stone.) Some things are thought to have intrinsic value. Here the value resides in the thing itself and not because of any benefit it may bring.

One can make the same distinction between means and ends. For instance, money is a means to affluence. If we pursue it as an end in itself we are mistaking its true value. Happiness however, it usually thought of as an end in itself. We don't pursue it for some other reason but for its own sake. This distinction is particularly important in discussion of the good. Consider for a moment:

“The object of any obligation in the realm of human affairs is always the human being as such. 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...”

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

Now it is not entirely clear what Weil means by “*eternal destiny*” but it is clear that she thinks that this marks humans out as being distinctly different in kind to other creatures. We might read this in relation to Kant's view that only human beings are ends in themselves. Certainly the term 'destiny' suggests an end in itself and the progress of her philosophy frequently mentions the respect and dignity owed to humans qua humans.

Are human beings intrinsically valuable? Are we ends in our selves or does the value of our existence depend upon some further end? Do other creatures have an intrinsic value?

Back to Weil's view of the good.

What is the good?

Weil nominates only 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.

Each of these conditions require interpretation and Weil attempts to flesh each requirement out by the use of analogies, examples and dialectical pairs.

Antithetical Pairs. If you have encountered Aristotle you may recall his version of the good as the mean between two extremes. This is NOT the case with Weil.

Weil's understanding of opposing structures in the good comes from Hegel via Marx. In this case, the antithetical pair 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.

But these needs can and often do come into opposition with one another in the real world. It may not be possible to improve the situation of the worst off (third world) without reducing the well-being of others (poor in Australia) for instance. The other general feature of needs is that they are to be distinguished from mere desires or wants.

Students might like to think up examples of 'needs' that are clearly not merely 'wants'. Do we need democracy or merely want it? How would we establish it was one or the other? Weil's example is an analogy with food, how well does that work?

The Needs of the Soul.

The Need for Order.

This is the most important need and is essential if Weil is to have any hope of avoiding contradictions between needs.

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

A texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out others ones.

Interestingly, Weil doesn't appear to be entirely certain that such a state can exist but she holds on to hope. In any case

The imperfections of a social order can be measured by the number of situations of this kind it harbours within itself

That is, by the number of conflicts between obligations.

The better a society (closer to the good) the fewer contradictions it will have. Ultimately this requires a consistent (perhaps singular?) view of the good. Pluralism throws up contradictions between obligations from different versions of the good all the time. Interestingly her view of the good also assumes a very robust version of free will.

For he for whom the threat of death or suffering is the one thing standing in the way of the performance of an obligation, can overcome this disability and only suffer in his body.

Not unlike the Existentialist version of choice.

There is only one choice to make. Either one must perceive another principle besides force at work in the universe or must acknowledge that force is the sole master of human relations. "...Force is a blind mechanism from which just and unjust chat effects come out be chance indifferently." If force reigns absolutely, justice is unreal. But it is not. We know this by

experience. Justice is real at the bottom of men's hearts. (From Gravity and Grace)

The need of Liberty

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

For having incorporated the rules into his own being the prohibited possibilities no longer present themselves to the mind.

This version of liberty is to be distinguished from modern definitions that define liberty as lack of constraint on action. That is, the ability to do what one wants. Interestingly she also identifies **an excess of choice as a threat to our liberty**.

The need for Responsibility

In the text, Weil identifies responsibility with the need to show initiative and to be useful. However, I think it is probably better understood as something like the ability to have some in-put (some say) over the direction of one's own life and the various organs and institutions that make up one's life. And to feel some sense of responsibility for the decisions that one helps make. In other words to be enmeshed in the society rather than alienated from it. These views would have also been very common among anarchists of this period. (Mikhail Bakunin 1817 – 1876)

The need for Equality.

Equality of opportunity but not as we know it. While Weil supports the notion of equality of opportunity as a way of achieving balance between the two social needs of inequality and equality, even so she is concerned about the hazards social climbing and by the hazards of competition. Competition in work adds to humiliation and drudgery. Someone must loose and this merely adds to resentment and bitterness.

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

I think it is important to notice that it isn't just that Weil thinks inequality damages the needs of individuals (or society) but that the good requires us to recognise each persons dignity irrespective of there place in the social order.

Society and Rootedness, Work and Dignity

The sort of society that meets the needs of the soul is one in which various 'human' needs are met. For Weil these are both physical and spiritual and importantly they presume a particular view of what it is to be a human being and therefore what is required in order to flourish or thrive.

This is a society that accords all individuals a basic level of dignity and freedom. It is a society in which life is meaningful rather than alienated. (where meaningful is identified with what is intrinsically valuable) It is also a society that is essentially looking for stability and cohesion in a world that had neither. In some sense her concerns for need for roots and social cohesion are a response to encroaching modernism and industrialisation.

One can for instance see similar concerns in other aspects of society at that time. John Ruskin (an

art critic immediately before WWI and hugely influential in the Art and Craft Movement.) for instance explicitly linked the aesthetic and the divine and attacked the alienation of workers by industrialisation. Ruskin also shared Weil's concern to recreate the virtuous view of craft labour. In the field of craft (the craft guilds) work was something inherently meaningful as well as useful – the crafts also allow a degree of immersion – a transcending the actuality. Of course both shared a neo platonian view. Plato tended to see the beautiful as a manifestation of the divine. So too Weil.

However, we shouldn't think of a concern for the dignity of workers as something no longer relevant. This is from Age reporting on a strike in Victoria.

Rare victory for workers whose dignity was cut to the bone

The lack of dignity in the factory is no better illustrated than in the events of August last year and the workplace death of Baiada worker Sarel Singh.

Workers said when their colleague was killed in the chicken packing machine, they had to remove his remains from the machine, hose it down and start up production again within two hours.

For those workers, their humanity had been stripped of all recognition beyond their status as workers. And in this precarious existence, one thing counts above everything: dignity.- November 25, 2011 The Age.

<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/politics/rare-victory-for-workers-whose-dignity-was-cut-to-the-bone-20111124-1nwwj.html>

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