SIMONE WEIL
AND THE
SPECTER
OF
SELF-PERPETUATING
FORCE

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Introduction

Everything submitted to contact with force is debased, whatever the contact. To strike or be struck results in the same corruption. The coldness of steel is equally mortal at the sword hilt or point. Everything exposed to contact with force is susceptible to perversion. All things in this world are exposed to contact with force, without exception, save love.

Simone Weil, “Of What Does the Occitanian Inspiration Consist?”

On June 13, 1940, while Simone Weil was shopping at an open market with her parents, Nazi troops rolled into Paris, declaring the capital under German control. In the past, Simone had theorized about the effects of force imposed on the vulnerable but had not physically endured it. Now she was a war refugee within her own country. She felt anguish for her fellow Frenchmen, her native country, and the world. Confronting social violence with effective counterforce had been her constant concern, but she saw no means of checking the violence spreading throughout Europe. She had lost her confidence in pacifism. Peaceful means of stopping Hitler had been tried and found wanting, and she firmly believed that no one could control unleashed force, which would spiral until its energies were fully spent. Her overriding question was: If, as Thucydides argued, “All beings, whoever they are, exploit to the fullest extent all the power in their command,” how could human beings, either as collectivities or as individuals, limit force? From embracing integral pacifism to accepting the reality that force must be
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met with force, she sought a counterforce with strict parameters that could prevent the contamination of both victor and vanquished.

Weil knew that brute force manifesting itself in human interactions brought defilement to those who dominated and those who suffered subjugation. Her anxiety over the vulnerability of the individual in society led her to warn early on against a highly centralized state run by an anonymous bureaucracy that facilitated the role of a totalitarian dictator. Weil wrote constantly to alert her countrymen to be vigilant to the luring call of force and to explore noncontaminating methods that could allow force to be used successfully against an oppressor. The paradox of force being both necessary and debasing left her distraught. She sought to resolve the mystery that God’s love for his creation coexisted with the self-perpetuating mechanism of force that catalyzes force in others, forever encumbering human relations. Her rationale that even war could have moral and spiritual justification—on rare occasions—adds useful nuance to our contemporary discussion of a “just-war” theory. All her compositions had a specific audience but were written in a philosophical style that revealed fragments of the truth she so earnestly sought to uncover. This study brings to the forefront Weil’s works that attempt to illuminate innovative ways to thwart the persistent human tendency to covet power.

FORMATIVE ASPECTS OF SIMONE WEIL’S LIFE

On February 3, 1909, Simone Weil was born into a middle-class Parisian family of Jewish origins but with no active religious affiliation. An impressionable and compassionate child, Simone was five years old when Europe plunged into the First World War. Her father’s wartime medical responsibilities gave her full opportunity to observe war’s disfigurement of human beings. Her parents, who prized intellectual achievement, supplemented Simone’s education with tutoring at home, particularly since she suffered from fragile health. Her adolescent and young adult years were plagued with severe migraine headaches for which no one had a remedy. From an early age she despaired that she would always remain on the threshold of truth and never be among the privileged who were granted entry. Being in the shadow of
her admired and brilliant older brother, André, who became renowned among twentieth-century mathematicians, reinforced this feeling.

After preparatory classes in the select Lycée Henri IV, where she studied under the guidance of philosopher Alain (Emile Chartier), Simone gained admittance, through a stiff competitive exam, to the academically elite École Normale Supérieure (ENS). At nineteen, she held her own as the only woman in her class of bright, well-prepared, and intellectually driven men. She specialized in philosophy, as was rare for a woman at that time. Although Weil was thoroughly at home in the ENS academically, as a young woman who disregarded traditional societal expectations she endured demeaning attitudes and cutting remarks from her male counterparts and professors.

Weil had a strong sense of goals and oriented her life around three guidelines: (1) to critically analyze any given question; (2) to write down her reflections; and (3) to take appropriate actions. She wrote constantly, setting down her ideas and empirical observations in her notebooks for later incorporation into her carefully crafted essays. The multiple facets of her ideas, her varied fields of inquiry, and the wide range of her activities were dazzling. The theme that held them all together was her intense compassion for vulnerable human beings, which made her explore solutions for the unjust treatment of common people by pursuing the causes of social inequity.

For Weil, theory was never separate from action. She believed that the validity of any commentary required an empirical knowledge of the conditions to be analyzed, so she always verified her philosophical theories by her readings and her personal life experiences. Each time she entered a milieu unusual for persons of her background, she brought away new insights that attentive readers still find valuable. Each endeavor involved skills of persuasion and, occasionally, sly means to gain access to places where she ordinarily would be refused. To the end of her days, by all the means within her power, she aspired to know the truth.

After receiving her agrégation—a diploma qualifying her to teach in French secondary and university education—Weil became a philosophy professor in various girls’ lycées. She spent her weekends designing and teaching courses in math, science, and language skills for workers as a step toward helping the downtrodden to fight oppressive
workplace conditions. She encouraged workers to consider their own best interest, which, to her thinking, entailed maintaining their human dignity by using their minds and energies in ways far beyond fighting for higher salaries. Through her activist presence and her many articles in workers’ bulletins, she supported working-class demands for equitable treatment and at one time attracted public scorn by participating in a strike of the unemployed.

Her first projects engaged questions concerning exploitation in the workplace, such as what the dangerous machinery and the long hours in the factories did to workers’ sense of self-worth. To know their situations firsthand, she took physically demanding work assignments in three different metallurgical factories and later performed laborious farmwork. After initially fighting against the hazardous work environment imposed on industrial factory workers, she widened her horizons to include all who suffered under the yoke of dehumanizing force. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, she enlisted as a soldier in the Colonna Durutti, an anarchist brigade. Her last project—never set in motion—was to form a corps of nurses to be transported into the thick of the fighting, bringing first aid medical treatment and a caring human presence to wounded soldiers in the field. In a manner quite consistent with her nature, she felt the need to bear the full brunt of battlefield violence if she were to theorize about the perils of war for individual souls.

THREE ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRISTIANITY

In the second half of the 1930s, three mystical contacts with Christianity reoriented Weil’s thinking and gave an explicitly Christian spiritual basis to her political and social engagement. Few people knew about these occurrences at the time. She described them in 1942 to her spiritual mentor, Father Perrin, by saying that Christ had come down and taken possession of her. Each mystical event occurred within the framework of what she had always held essential in the condition of being human: age-old cultural traditions, the humility of the poor in spirit, and a surrounding of natural beauty, which she came to consider a form of God’s implicit love.
The first mystical contact took place in a Portuguese fishing village, probably shortly after her factory work. Observing a mournful Saints’ Day procession of women carrying candles and chanting ancient religious canticles as they circled the fishing boats in the light of a full moon, she understood that “Christianity is the religion of slaves par excellence, that slaves cannot not adhere to it, and I too along with the others.” Her use of the word *slaves* in the framework of Christianity implied total submission through willing consent to God’s love, even when the material conditions imposed intense suffering. This idea became a dominant theme in her final writings. The second experience took place in Assisi. She wrote to Father Perrin: “While alone in the small Romanesque twelfth-century chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli—a marvel of incomparable purity, where Saint Francis often prayed—something stronger than I obliged me for the first time in my life to kneel down.”

The third experience came during some crushing headaches as she was reciting George Herbert’s poem “Love,” which, for her, had the virtue of a prayer. She had been introduced to Herbert’s metaphysical poems by a young man she had met during Holy Week in the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes, which was renowned for the beauty of its Gregorian chant. In the same letter to Perrin, she wrote: “When suddenly Christ took possession of me, neither the senses nor the imagination had any part; I felt through my suffering the presence of love, analogous to the love seen in the smile on a beloved face.”

Weil came to consider liturgical services as another form of the implicit love of God. Although drawn to the Catholic Church, for complex reasons related to her insistence on absolute integrity she rejected Father Perrin’s request to baptize her or to be a member of the Catholic Church. She held firmly to her freedom of thought, wanting to bear witness to all who had never had the chance or desire to know the historical Christ. In this letter of farewell to Father Perrin, she affirmed her belief that many venerable religions had valid contacts with the divine. In addition, she explained that the Church’s refusal to acknowledge past transgressions, such as the Inquisition and the Crusade against the peace-loving Albigensians, was incipient totalitarianism. The authoritarian approach of the Church had led to the practice of *anathema sit*, a formula in former Church practice that imposed
excommunication on anyone who refused to accept Church dogma. She believed that “to function properly the intelligence requires total freedom, including the right to deny everything, and no domination whatsoever.”

Christianity, nonetheless, impregnated her life and thinking, with the passion of Christ holding the focal place. Her journal entries reveal admiring echoes from the Gospels, a source of great beauty for her. The Iliad, which she knew so well, took on a new illumination when colored by a profound Christian interpretation. Weil wished to know the truth conveyed by the sacred scriptures of long-standing religions, and she found solace in the beauty of Hindu sacred literature during her intense study of ancient Asian texts. Her reading of the Bhagavad-Gita resonated with Christian undertones, which are revealed in her Marseilles and London notebooks.

Intimations of the pervasive presence in Weil’s thought of her mystical experiences can be inferred from her later writings. Her life, thought, and writings wove an intricate tapestry from beginning to end, and her mysticism added significant texture to her life’s design. Her mystical encounters intensified her attraction to Christianity and reinforced her desire to orient humankind toward love of neighbor rather than toward paths of violence. When Christ’s presence became manifest to her, Weil had already moved on from militant worker activism, without ever diminishing her deep interest in improving the lot of the disinflicted members of society. Her understanding of human suffering, however, received new illumination related to the sacredness of the human person—every human person.

Her contacts with Christianity, spanning the last half-dozen years of her life, heightened her perspectives on the essential roles of beauty, humility, and suffering in the human condition. For Weil, beauty attracted human beings toward God, while brute force crushed human souls and destroyed all that was precious. Humility allowed one to be fully attentive to another’s needs by mindful listening. Suffering, accepted in the love of God, could be purifying; Christ’s humble acceptance of his passion remained the supreme model for humankind. All suffering that could be eliminated should be; no one could ask for suffering, nor should violence ever be imposed. Human beings had the obligation to see that their neighbors did not suffer the deprivation of
the vital needs of soul or body. In innovative fashion, she delineated those needs in a prelude to her last work, *The Need for Roots (L'enracinement).*

### A PHILOSOPHER’S DEATH

Weil died on August 23, 1943, in a sanatorium for tubercular patients in Ashford, England. The prior year, she had accompanied her elderly parents to safety in the United States, with the resolve, nevertheless, of returning to France, but she got only as far as London. Given hazardous wartime conditions, even getting that far took relentless determination. She was torn by the thought that she had abandoned her native land in its time of need. Her fragile health and extreme disappointment at not getting permission from the Free French Forces to reenter France led to a physical breakdown with tubercular complications. A cure was rendered impossible by her refusal to eat more than what she believed was available to the most deprived of her compatriots in occupied France, or to accept rich foods—considered the remedy for tuberculosis—while the British were short on rations. The rigor of her thought imposed a harsh consistency on her lifestyle. Up until her death, she continued writing to fulfill her self-imposed mission of describing a postwar society in which compassionate people would reject social oppression by assuring an equitable, impartial justice enlightened by supernatural love.

### SIMONE WEIL’S INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

Weil’s thought merits attention in the twenty-first century. Her writings reveal the evolution of a gifted mind that illuminated traditional wisdom with fresh perspectives concerning the plight of human beings in the world. As a philosopher, she strove ceaselessly to gain insights into the unequal and unstable relationships of force that allowed the powerful to dominate the vulnerable. Her keen observation of human behavior, her first-rate intellect, and her practical application of concepts advanced by great thinkers qualify her work as a genuine
source of theoretic and pragmatic ideas. She had a profound humanism, a deep love for her fellow human beings, and a talent for clear, accessible prose. Her mental probing was always open-ended, and her rhetorical queries suggested further provocative lines of thought. She exacted constant verification of the insights gleaned from either contemporary events or her reading. At the ENS, she pursued her search for truth while interacting with intellects of equal stature, all given great latitude in their studies. That excellent academic training reinforced her drive to understand the human condition and honed her ability to express her findings with lucidity.

Weil’s habit of underpinning theoretical ideas with a form of praxis makes her work a unique approach to confronting the decline of compassion in today’s world. The horrendous conditions of her time provided an impetus and a framework for her pursuit of effective ways to confront and block the use of force in the social sphere. She began her intellectual and activist engagement in the struggles between social classes but then moved to conflicts between nations. Her mysticism infused her reasoning and enlightened her thinking with a new radiance. Toward the end of her life, Weil’s political, social, and mystical approaches to human existence meshed into one philosophy, founded on the sacredness of human life.

Weil believed that philosophy’s role was to uncover an already existing truth, not to create a new system. Consequently, her philosophical inquiry gave close attention to the physical world, literature, sacred texts, and contemporary ideas. After scrutinizing each new concept carefully, Simone Weil incorporated what she intuited as true, but she never ceased delving further. Although she did not find a definitive response to the enigma of force ever present in the human condition, she laid out parameters adaptable to the contextual contingencies for action. Her quest to know the teleology of human existence had no limits.

Along with great literature, the works of notable social and political philosophers, past and present, nourished her thinking. Alain, who had a formative influence on her, had an original style of teaching in which he drew philosophical conclusions from literary works. Weil continued this method in her own studies and teaching. She absorbed
ideas from others and then incorporated them into the fabric of her philosophical theories without specifically identifying their source. Her custom was to take the basic idea and then push the thought further, making innovative applications, where useful, to contemporary problems. She read widely and voraciously, at times entering sources in her notebooks, but many times not. Nevertheless, the allusions, for the most part, have been pinpointed and studied by Weil readers. Many authors held an important place in the forefront of her thought: Plato, the Greek playwrights, Homer, Heraclites, Kant, Rousseau, Spinoza, Marx, Alain. The list is by no means exhaustive. Others have made excellent analyses of the relationship between Weil’s ideas and those of other eminent minds.6

HER WRITINGS

We are fortunate that, despite the upheaval created by the occupation of France in 1940, Weil’s friends and neighbors, aware of the extraordinary quality of her contributions, were able to salvage the major part of the multiple papers left in her apartment or in others’ keeping. Beyond her many finely crafted essays, Weil left a broad legacy of thought in rough-hewn fragments jotted down in notebooks (or cahiers). These entries furnish a rich store of information that she had gleaned from her reflections, her readings, and her observations of the interconnectedness of humankind, the world, and the divine. Her manifold reflections bring to light the process by which she sharpened her thinking and developed ideas for future essays. For the reader, they yield a wealth of material, exceedingly dense, with many themes interspersed, and display the processes of an extraordinary mind guided by the unquenchable desire to know the truth and reveal it to others.

Over 90 percent of her notebook entries were written during the last three years of her life while she had to be continually on the move: in Marseilles, on the seven-week transatlantic passage, in New York, and finally in London. She used school copybooks, labeled them, tore out pages to rearrange them, and sometimes kept more than one notebook at a time for different purposes. Marginal comments added a
later thought to the original notation or served a different function entirely. Ideas were packed together, with separate strands of thought moving in parallel fashion, and the pages and covers were overlaid with script, diagrams, and formulas.

These notes, written for her personal reflection, are now part of the Fonds Simone Weil at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, along with her manuscripts, still being prepared for publication through the Gallimard publishing house. The exacting scholars who edited her cahiers for the Oeuvres complètes have masterfully detected their chronology from the type of paper used, the mention of a book or an event, and the notebook’s appearance. These indications have helped the editorial team to arrange the entries in sequential order for the four annotated volumes of her notebooks, which supply readers with new sources for exploring and weighing her significant contribution to social and political thought. They also reveal a Simone Weil hitherto unknown—not different but fuller—with a wider range of intellectual pursuits than had been imagined from her finished articles. Because of her short life span of a scant three and a half decades, many ideas noted in her daily writing were never shaped into polished essays, so this raw material offers precious glimpses into her thinking. My study has made maximum use of Weil’s notebook comments, of which only a limited number have been translated into English, to explore her formative insights into both the nature of a ubiquitous ruthless force and her representation of a countering positive force.

**SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY**

Through this work, the English reading public will gain easier access to those writings of Simone Weil that portray the full range of her ideas on exploitative force and its opposite: an efficacious counterforce for the good. I have sorted out her meaning of the term *force* in many different contexts, whether she was referring to “any natural agent capable of effecting change in matter” or to the unjust social pressures exerted for personal self-aggrandizement and exploitation by the dominant over the subservient.7 Despite her preference for precision in word choices, her use of the term *force* has multiple applications, all
of which reflect the uniqueness of her insights. After beginning with the word *oppression* during her social activist period, she shifted to the term *force* when referring to the increasing National Socialist threat. To further complicate the issue, she often conflated the scientific terms of *force* and *energy* when speaking of transformations in physical matter. She concluded by referring to supernatural grace as the sole good force to counter evil.

By presenting Weil’s fresh reading of Homer’s *Iliad* and her particular interpretation of the Bhagavad-Gita, this book traces the progression from her early commentaries on oppressive social conditions to her proposed resolution for the dilemma of how to deploy force without being perverted by its contamination. I show how the wisdom and beauty of the Hindu philosophical poem offered her consolation in her reluctant acceptance of a justified use of force. The insights Weil found in this ancient mystical poem concerning her critical question involving judgments to be made when confronting violent behavior helped her to delineate guidelines necessary to any fruitful use of force. The notebooks are our source for knowing the revelations she saw in the Gita, for these conclusions never found their full expression in essay form because of her untimely death.

Two lesser-known pendant essays, one on reading or interpreting a situation and the other on a system of values, are highlighted as connecting links to her ultimate conclusions on ways to counter force effectively. One must read one’s fellow human beings objectively and measure the choice of reactions against an eternal criterion of the good. Weil’s Project for a Corps of Frontline Nurses receives a fresh analysis to give it its worthy place as a fitting and ultimate praxis for her theory on the radiance of good actions.

Finally, I examine how a New York meeting in 1946 of three social philosophers—American, Italian, and French—provided the primary impetus to the diffusion of Weil’s writings. Little has been written about the initial circulation of her ideas after World War II. After her early activist polemics written for educators and workers, she seldom focused on publishing her work. The encounter of three journalists, agnostics by their own account, is presented for the first time as a crucial springboard for the spread of her ideas throughout North America and Europe.
Very near the end of her life, Simone Weil wrote to her mother that she had a message of pure gold for humankind but feared that no one would be inclined to hear it. She had sought confirmation for this perceived message in the physical universe, in human psychology, and in classic and sacred texts. Her experiences had shown her that recognition of the potent self-perpetuating capacity of force, inherent in human relationships, would require new social strategies in view of a more comprehensive understanding of the spiritual dimension in human beings. She wanted others to be aware of this reality.

Her mystical encounters with Christ had revealed to her the impersonal sacredness of every individual, which dwells invisibly within every person and does not depend on any personal or random attributes. Although this sacred part of every human being that goes through life expecting good to be done to it is vulnerable, it is within this sacred aspect of every human being that obedient consent to God’s love occurs. The community must protect this fragile center of the individual, which can be reduced to impotence by cold indifferent force. Because knowledge of the supernatural is transmitted through all the great traditional religions and their cultures, concern for the well-being of one’s neighbor means that everyone has the obligation to preserve these civilizations from annihilation.

Weil’s message dealt with the constant imperative of keeping force checked because individuals’ lives were at risk, as were the traditions of civilizations that transmitted valuable facets of the supernatural. The churning violence could be quelled only by persons who acted selflessly for a higher good and who accepted the sacrifices required. From her anguish for others’ suffering, Weil brought out a new understanding of the human condition. She desperately hoped her message would be heard. This study follows her tortuous path from her early recognition of the self-perpetuating autonomy of violence to her final resolution of the continual struggle to constrain brute force from destroying humankind’s vital bridges to the supernatural.