

“Is What She Says True?”

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A. When she was dying, in a hospice near London, Simone Weil continued to correspond with friends and to receive them in her room. To one friend from childhood Weil said that she

regret(ted) that people’s attention was directed to her person rather than to her thoughts. ...in her letter of August 4 (1943) (to her parents)...she regrets that people praise her intelligence rather than take a real interest in what she is saying. The laudatory remarks about her intelligence, she says, are *purposely* made so as to evade the question, “Is what she says true?” This is the question that she wanted to see asked. This was her final testament.¹

(Cependant elle ne pouvait, semble-t-il, s’empêcher de regretter que l’attention des gens se portât sur sa personne plutôt que sur sa pensée/ Du même qu’en quittant Marseille elle avait conseillé au P. Perrin de prendre soin de ses pensées plutôt que de se préoccuper d’elle-même, de même, dans sa lettre de 4 août, présentant un autre voyage, elle regrette qu’on loue son intelligence au lieu de s’intéresser vraiment à ce qu’elle dit. Les éloges de son intelligence

¹ Simone Pétrement, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, *Simone Weil A Life*. (New York, Schocken, 1976), p. 535, quoting from Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 199-200. Italics in the original.

ont poyr but, dit-elle, d'éviter la question "Dit-elle vrai ou non?" C'est cette question qu'elle voudrait vor poser. Tel est son dernier testament.)²

Her passing ten days later was the most complex philosophical death since Socrates. No one knows precisely what happened, either medically but also as to her intention: whether it was to enact a Cathar ritual, or to mortify herself, or the result of terminal tuberculosis, or to fulfill, or waste, her genius. The facts show that she was as much a rational actor in the events leading to her passing as she might have been the martyring mystic of her legend. This event completed one of the most extraordinary lives of a philosopher we have record of. In the space of less than two decades of adult life, Weil engaged in Marxist and anarchist polemic, labor action, collective political organizing, the Spanish Civil War, the French Resistance, factory work, and agricultural work, as well as a decade as a professor of philosophy; studied Greek philosophy and literature, physics and quantum mechanics, number theory, technology, economics, and sociology; taught herself Greek, Sanskrit, Assyrian, and other ancient languages; immersed herself in the major philosophical movements of her time, in Hindu thought, and in Kabbalah; and worked her way through large regions of the history of philosophy and of Christian theology. In all these endeavors she was a woman, a Jew, a Christian, a French patriot, and a world citizen. She died three years younger than Mozart.

This busy career made Weil well known to a large number of intellectuals and, to a certain extent, to a more general public. In public life she repelled and at the same time attracted attention, engaging it and withdrawing from it; finding herself more noticed as a result of trying harder to make herself yet more invisible, the thinker must have seemed stuck, Chinese finger-puzzle style, in the personality. This image was strongly detailed in her appearance, manner, and story. But beneath the her baggy, worn clothing and her shapeless hats,³ her intellect was tight and

² This quotation from the Pétrement's original French text (*La vie de Simone Weil*, Paris, Fayard, 1973), p.688, includes all parts of the paragraph elided in my selection from the English translation. The source for Weil's words is given in the French edition as Weil, *Écrits de Londres* (Paris, Gallimard, 1957), p. 256. The citation from Weil's correspondence with Perrin is probably a reference to the text translated as Weil, trans. Emma Craufurd, *Waiting for God* (New York, Putnam, 1951), Letter III, p. 18.

³ That Weil's clothing was anti-fashion and unsexed is not as clear as it is generally thought to be. Maria Rybakova, "Two Genders of the Soul Regarding the Love of God," in *Arion* 16.1 (Spring/Summer 2008), pp. 119-129, argues for its provenance in fashion among feminists of the generation preceding Weil. This question being afiel from the current essay, I presume that she did not intend to express or enhance her individuality or personality in the manner most commonly thought of as fashion but that it does express something—often stylishly and powerfully, to my

ripped to the fighting essentials. Her neural fibers were as awake and taut as the muscles of a predator mammal or a raptor. She conducted a relentless argument with herself, an inward struggle that seemed to be more her true subject than the activities that occasioned her comments. There was something feral about her, a restless cerebration, far more combative than sporting, though often deadly funny. She refused to be comforted. Despite her long list of historical and doctrinal reasons for refusing baptism and reception into the Catholic Church, and while one cheers her steadfast independence of thought against all the beastly machines and damned institutions that weigh us down, one also senses that the heart of the matter was that she refused absolution, from any source beyond her own suffering, and even the rewards of daily compromise with society and, finally, with life itself.

Simone Weil was aware that people induced themselves, and enabled the seduction of others, to turn away from the tough bottom line to which honest thinking, in her view, leads us. She urged her interlocutors and readers to vigilance in place of narcosis by personal attraction. Her relentlessly open eyes tolerated only rare escape from their penetration; her sense of the stakes was burning and insistent; her attention seems fearless, and behind its work she was patient. Like Mozart she seemed to have been born to be the conduit of a line of melody that fed upon her life, sounding at a very early age and never silencing. It knocked, and she turned toward the sound. She might have said: I think to its beat. She did say: “Intelligence uses me.”⁴

Even though she no longer can bust into the room and subvert our sociable chatter, she has left a compelling argument for her insistence on our attention. In this “testament,”⁵ Weil, standing, as it were, next to herself—saying “Is what she says true?” or “Does she speak what is true or not?”—delivers a message as to how to evaluate ideas about ultimate issues. She asks two things of us: first, not to do something and, second, to do something. These two requests are the two parts of the

eye—leaving the degree of her conscious calculation unknown to us.

⁴ Gabriella Fiori, trans. Joseph Berrigan, *Simone Weil: An intellectual biography* (Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 9.

⁵ “Testament” is the epithet given by Weil’s friend and biographer Simone Petrement as quoted at the top of this essay. Weil sometimes used the word to describe her great 1934 essay “Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression,” published in 1955 in *Oppression et Liberté*.

approach by which she instructs us to think about her work. She is not polite, nor is she dry. Her statement is a persistent, worried instruction that we should controvert her ideas rather than her actions and behavior. People often were attracted to her in a way and repelled in another way, sometimes more of the first and sometimes more of the latter. Here Weil doesn't renounce her way of life in any way, and the details of her life show that she was not in the least concerned about the judgments of others on her choices. But she was profoundly concerned that our attraction to personality and other mundane loyalties ran contrary to our endeavors to find truth, wherein we must accept our conscientious treatment of other people. Having lived out the moral consequences of her thought, throughout her life from youth to death, this passionate instruction compels our attention for two purposes—to find out exactly what she had in mind and to see what her idea as to how to think about philosophical positions can teach us in looking at the work of others.

B. Her life and work remain known to many in the form of the image of a celebrity. Like other celebrities, this image mixes the attractive, the repulsive the peculiar, and the common into fame. Here the holder of the celebrated image, the person within the image, has singular authority in saying that one ought not choose among views of the world according to the fame of their advocates and opponents or according to the engagement of one's feelings by personal image or celebrity, even though such feelings necessarily form part of our views of the world. It's a lot easier to be entertained, or catered to, than to study texts with rigor and perseverance. The first request that we identify in her "testament" is: don't take the easy way.

It seems a commonplace to say that truth is to be found someplace other than in celebrity. What is obvious, though, is often not easy to do. We were not always habituated to celebrity. Nineteenth-century marketing, starting with the wide circulation of celebrities' images by *cartes de visite* in the 1850's and by the cabinet card in the 1860's, followed at a step by product endorsements, enabled the sellers of products, by exaggerating the personalities of certain artists and thinkers, to create an image in which their actual work has little place. Even apart from commercial exploitation, people commonly feel that there is truth of some kind in the stories of large personalities. This is one of the bases of drama. Furthermore, we have surely learned that emotion and reason ineluctably miscegenate in our lives. When there

is technology able to fascinate populations with celebrity, acting in the service of money and power, the job of discriminating between both reason and feeling as constituents of critical thought and the employment of them for the purpose of deception and control ceases to be simple. Attitude often becomes ideology over time. Even a philosopher is limited by his temperament.

Let us distinguish the two ways in which Simone Weil's question indicates people respond to her beliefs. The first is in chief response to her character, behavior, and deeds. Let us call this "Simone." The second is in chief response to her philosophical opinions and writings. Let us call this "Weil." These are not personae which she projected, nor are they separate parts of her, for in no person are these parts unmixed; these are two ways in which others process, let us say, her message. So let us apply the name "Simone Weil" to the whole person. To some, Simone Weil is the argument made by the actions of Simone, to others she is the argument made by the writings of Weil, and perhaps to all she is Simone Weil as well. In her "testament," her point is that people have a tendency to focus on Simone and to fail to listen to Weil. For although her character was powerful and her intense struggles in life indefeasibly engaging, she argued for her ideas by other means. In her view, when personality fascinates us we shall lose ground in governing ourselves and shall mistake the loud presence of celebrity for the impersonal reality of justice and truth. This loss comes from *the reduction of overall view into personal image*.

C. There is a way, however, in which we can understand both "Simone" and "Weil" as two ways of philosophizing, rather than being obliged to take one as serious and the other as junk. Those who chiefly see Weil when they look at Simone Weil argue that, because ontology and epistemology are descriptive explanations of certain general matters, philosophical doctrines and opinions on these matters must be judged by argumentation for and against; they cannot entail value judgments about such matters, the logic of propositions being analyzable without reference to the personalities that create them. Certainly without critical examination any overall vision⁶ is liable to trivialized, misunderstood, or hidden. But some people

⁶ In this paper I use "overall vision" in place of the technical term "world view."

find the overall vision of a philosopher to be the important bit and analysis of arguments to be not merely petty and tiresome but finally insensitive and misleading when it comes to overall truth in our understanding and in moral action.

This “Simone” approach need not do nothing to diminish Weil—the smart-as-a-whip, utterly passionate, partially systematic thinker, a mechanic of concepts, premises, and entailed conclusions. When we are of a mind chiefly to see Simone when thinking about Simone Weil, we hold that no ideas are honestly separable from the emotions and experiences in which they arise and that if we did not think so as to express and to justify our feelings we needn’t bother with logic at all. When we look at the way a life is lived and at the character of its star, we do seek in fact to know an overall vision. We sometimes read a person’s deeds and character in order to see an overall vision of the universe or of human life, while at other times we read the person’s books, if any, to find out about it. When we focus on Simone we focus on her overall vision as given in her story and in her writings, but in this event the latter is used not so much as argument but as vision.

At the outer edges, this is a question of why we engage in philosophy at all. Must we not say that we initiate it with a conclusion in mind, if we are to be honest? And is not that conclusion, or set of attitudes toward life, the heart of the matter? Or do we engage in so sufficiently disinterested a pursuit of truth that we may say with a clear conscience that we study philosophy in order to be logical and thereby to be correct, the alternative being one degree or another of obscurantism and superstition? Something similar to this polarity is commonly found throughout ordinary life: for example, it is often said that in the lives of institutions and businesses there are visionaries and there are bean-counters, both of whose periods of control of the enterprise give way to one another in alternating phases.

“Simone” is an argument for *the power of example*. It is a specimen of the preference for feelings over rationality. In the present case, so strongly marked by the force of Simone Weil’s life, as in many cases, this preference is the protection and favor of something personal and individual over what is seen as remote, cold, and impersonal. Schopenhauer and Weil are twinned in many ways as philosophers, but one way in which they appear to be quite opposite is that Simone had a moral authority by virtue of her suffering and sacrifice that Schopenhauer seems not to have. His life was otiose and regular for the most part, whereas hers

could hardly have been more strained and disrupted. One also can make a case that Schopenhauer's way of life was an example of a different sort from Simone's—that there was an Arthur who, anxious, hurt, and reactive with profound intelligence, lived every minute in order to propagate and defend the idea he thought would be of most benefit to mankind, this being his final answer to our ultimate questions, so that therefore his physical vigor, flute-playing, and other good habits were employed to nourish Schopenhauer in his great work. In this case, Arthur Schopenhauer is an example of how to live as a philosopher according to one standard of success, that seems to include compassion for one's self in an ethics of compassion, whereas Simone Weil is an example of a life of philosophical rigor such that caring for one's self has no purchase on conscience in light of the suffering of the world. Weil strongly argued that she did not suffer more than others, and Schopenhauer perhaps would strongly argue that he did not suffer less than others were he to open his heart to us on this matter.

The appeal to good example is stronger than the appeal to celebrated image, though they both involve emotional appeal to authority, which Weil rejected in all cases. This injunction, that truth cannot be determined by the appeal to personality of any sort, comes from her conclusion that the personal is an impediment to the apprehension of moral obligation.⁷ It leads us to divide suffering persons into those more worthy of compassion and those less worthy of it, whereas her examination of the sources of suffering and compassion showed her that all such division is in error. Because truth is universal and therefore impersonal and because by consequence error is particular and personal,⁸ one does not know through personal experience, of others or of one's self, which behavior is exemplary and which is not, except upon thoroughly and honestly settling one's conscience in the search for metaphysical and moral truth. Chance, not justice, determines which good examples are recorded and which do not, and Weil went to some pains to show that generally we are blind to the true lessons of history. But the object of our search is the sacred, “and there is nothing sacred except the good and that which pertains to it.”⁹ Our experiences of

⁷ Made by her in “La personne et la sacré,” known in the English translation by Richard Rees as “Human Personality,” published in *Selected Essays 1934-1943* (London, Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 9-34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10. Her rejection of goodness by example seems to me to be part of her attitude toward the Catholic sacraments—that these morsels and moments of goodness are too much about the individual person (cf. *Waiting for God*, pp. 13-14).

personality are experiences of particular, which being sometimes good and sometimes bad will distract us from the universal and sacred good. Good examples are of no more use to us than bad examples. And if the single personality is the source of egotism, then bunches of personalities, however noble, make things worse:

Perfection is impersonal. Our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin. The whole effort of the mystic has always been to become such that there is no part left in his soul to say "I."

But the part of the soul which says "We" is infinitely more dangerous still.¹⁰

A crowd of exemplary persons plus I add up to nothing in my search for the sacred. Indeed, most people do feel that humility is more dispositive in commending virtue than pride.

Somewhere the lines of Simone and Weil might converge, but unless we have a standard by which to examine an overall view we are in peril. To ask for a "standard" is a minimal demand, for the standard might or might not be a rule and it might or might not involve good example. But we must have something if we are not to cheat or fool ourselves. This much is common sense, but to accept Weil's claim that all personality is misdirection from truth requires a look at the logic of this way of ordering matters. Does her "testament" mean that Weil and Weil alone is the honest way to consider truth? Or is there something in the world view approach to philosophy, the "Simone" approach, which, surplus to all personality, remains valuable to the determination of truth apart from the considerations given us by logic? There either is or is not some part of the overall vision approach to philosophical thought that has greater validity than good example and greater validity even than personality. Simone Weil strained to live according to her principles, so that her actions represented claims as liable to evaluation as are her writings. The woman who said "intelligence uses me" does refer our judgment to something other than her strenuous life and, by extension, all our lives. One must look elsewhere for the standard by which to know whether what she, or perhaps anyone, says is true or not.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

D. Weil's directed her idea of "logic" in immediate accord with her basic view of reality. This view has both empirical and mystical sides, which meet in her explanation of God's creation of the universe and his relationship to it. The name of this meeting-place is "number," and therefore it is in the essay in which she argues for at a Pythagorean ontology that one finds her ideas most cohesively presented.¹¹

The universe is "a compact mass of obedience,"¹² which we know as necessity, for "necessity is the obedience of matter to God."¹³ God's method of the creation of the universe endowed it with one feature shared by everything and everyone: the dead weight of necessity. His peculiar method was the complete absence of himself as the creator, making all creation by tearing away from his being a realm from which he is withdrawn.¹⁴ Thus, all necessity and therefore all force is the absence of divine love, like the suction of a deep low tide. The attraction of gravity is the withdrawal of God. Weil's solid equation of all efficient, operating physical forces to necessity, and thereby to affliction, linked physics to all other objects of discussion: her metaphysics, her mysticism, her dissertation on Descartes, her practical analyses of political events in the 1930's, and latterly her pacifism. She concluded that martial violence is simply one part of this universal necessary affliction. The victor or the killer is as necessarily projected into affliction as the lifeless corpse of the one killed. He is dead weight; armies are dead weight, whether vanquished or victorious; the Fuehrer, the Pope, the President, Simone Weil, you and I are dead weights too, like jumbo dumbbells dropped hard enough to break through the floor down to the next story and, by necessity of gravity, through each story to the earth below, emptily afflicting other dumbbells.

¹¹ Simone Weil, trans. (Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler), "The Pythagorean Doctrine," in *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* (London and New York, Routledge, 2003), pp. 151-201. This volume, first published in 1957, comprises essays from two separate posthumous collections of her works. The essay on Pythagoras is taken from *Les intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (Paris, 1951).

A good deal of the content of this rich work is outside the scope of the present essay, but there is a thread of constitutive ideas that we can follow in explaining her view of critical thought.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁴ The theological term for this concept of creation is *kenōsis* (κενωσις).

This view of things yields Weil's idea of human intelligence. Since "reality for the human mind is contact with necessity,"¹⁵ our understanding stands, in almost all circumstances, inside the area from which God has withdrawn. All we see is the "necessary connections which constitute the very reality of the world" but which "have no reality in themselves except as the object of intellectual attention in action."¹⁶ In most circumstances, our thought is about things just as our actions are upon things and just as our behavior toward others proceeds as if they too were things: "...everyone disposes of others as he disposes of inert things, either in deed, if he has the power, or in thought."¹⁷ It follows that our entire knowledge of sensible phenomena is "recognition" of necessity in each datum.¹⁸ Whenever we look upon the world and see necessity, or construe it according to necessity, we at each such moment acknowledge nature to be brute force. Truth is opposite to this: from God's point of view nature is entirely conditional.

Weil chases the human critical faculty into a corner. What makes necessity understandable is number. The constant changes which one thing entails upon another are quantifiable by arithmetic variations: we break our backs upon numbers.¹⁹ All the world is a ceaseless movement into and out of equilibria, cresting and breaking according to necessity, which is what the laws of physics truly are in her view. Since all change can be represented by ratios, she saw "every phenomenon...as a rupture of equilibrium, linked with all other changes through the compensation of successive ruptures of equilibrium."²⁰ Therefore, all existence is affliction, which for Weil is another name for necessity; and the entire system of the universe is an automated assembly-line for the manufacture of affliction. Knowledge is of the necessary; understanding is of number. This is everything we know by reason and insofar as we know by reason. Because efficacy in the world is

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁹ Weil's initial position in this essay on the ontology of number is indifference to nominalism and to realism (*ibid.*, p. 159), but once she gains altitude she makes the realist claim (*ibid.*, p. 178).

²⁰ "Foundations of a New Science," in Weil, trans. Richard Rees, *Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (London, 1968), p. 79.

comprised by arithmetic necessity, it is violence.

Since number is the correct explanation of material reality, why should it trouble us that data and the logic of data are metaphysically delusory?

...this becoming, composed of the ruptures of equilibrium, is in reality an equilibrium because the ruptures of equilibrium compensate each other...²¹

This is one of Weil's great themes. There is an equal sign between each up and each down. Of this her most potent analogy is a body of water, for, though easily dislocated, no matter what parts of it rise and fall, and no matter how far or how often, at the end of time the course of least resistance is a perfect equilibrium across its surface. Water, being a universal liquid, represents the natural world, including our normal consciousness of it, as "an element at once resistant yet fluid."²² She regards every exercise of our intelligence in the world—our acquisitiveness and property, our control of things and of persons, our science and our skill—as being a "dream" addressed to shadows and not reality.²³ Critical and analytic thought are *illusions of control*. For Weil they are just like the other parts of "the human will,"²⁴ "the natural part of ourselves,"²⁵ "the whole psychological content of human consciousness."²⁶ These comprise what she calls throughout her work "first-person thought."²⁷ They are like drops poured onto the even surface of still water.

There is one exception to this in the human apparatus.:

The faculty which does not belong to this world is the faculty of consent. Man is free to consent to necessity, or not.²⁸

²¹ Weil, "The Pythagorean Doctrine," (*q. v. super*), p. 185f.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 195

²³ Weil, "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," (*q. v. super*), pp. 91 and 104. This idea is at the core of her profound analysis of Marxism and society in this essay. A short and strong use of it with respect to money and property will be found in her "On Bankruptcy," in *Selected Essays 1934-1943* (*q. v. super*), pp. 145-149

²⁴ Weil, "The Pythagorean Doctrine," (*q. v. super*), p. 181.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

Violence continues for as long as we consent to it in illusion rather than grasp it by a portion of the liberty with which God brought it into being. Here Weil is taking on the perennial question of the immanence of the godly in the earthly and the participation of the temporal in the eternal. In one essay after another she uses different metaphors²⁹ to explain how it is that a person becomes compassionate amidst a universe of apparently necessary destruction and sorrow, or how working with one's hands becomes beautiful and sacred rather than carcerative. The best of these metaphors may be the one found toward the conclusion of the essay that argues for her Pythagorean Christianity:

We are like shipwrecked persons clinging to logs upon the sea and tossed in an entirely passive manner by every movement of the waves. From the height of heaven God throws each one a rope. He who seizes the rope and does not let go, despite the pain and the fear, remains as much as the others subject to the buffeting of the waves; only for him these buffets combine with the tension of the cord to form a different mechanical whole.³⁰

For the purposes of the present essay, at this point we must look only from a distance at the social and devotional thought that Weil developed from these ideas. Suffice it to say that she rejected rationalism as a foundation for thinking about the well-being of men and women.

E. Philosophers often talk about familiar things in ways that are unfamiliar. Like Schopenhauer, Simone Weil described the way the world must appear to us as other than the way the world really is. She carefully modulated common pairs of ideas—such as I and we, willing and unwilling, necessary and conditional—in order to lift the familiar up off the real with as little distance between the two as possible. She was quite as uncompromising as he was in assessing the omnipresent asperity of causality in the phenomenal world. They both measured its consequences to much

²⁹ Among these are: the rainbow connecting the God and creation, the knife on the spinning grindstone, and the pedal by which a dressmaker moves a wheel in the sewing machine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

the same sum. Also, she stands closer to him³¹ and to Wittgenstein than to a classic mechanist like La Mettrie, insofar as they believed that the silent sphere beyond both empirical and critical understanding is real.

Like them, Weil used concepts of our understanding to trace this frontier. Her description of what lies beyond it, more positive from the beginning than Wittgenstein's at the end, grew firmer in her last years, nourishing the final florescence. By 1942, in her farewell letters to her religious mentor, she concluded that "intellectual honesty," her commendation for her most advanced thought,

...should be indifferent to all ideas without exception, including for instance materialism and atheism; it must be equally welcoming and equally reserved with regard to every one of them. Water is indifferent in this way to the objects that fall into it. It does not weigh them; they weigh themselves, after a certain time of oscillation.³²

This indifference is the result of having passed beyond normal efficient and useful thought. It is "total liberty," a different kind of thinking which is not "only...opposed to faith."³³ Note that in her view theistic ideas may be as opposed to faith as atheistic ideas, for these doctrines are like different type fonts embodying the same and true thoughts.³⁴ In these years she began to specify this thinking as attention, not analysis, given to persons, not ideas, prayer without any purpose of domination.³⁵

By her testamentary question Simone Weil might be said to have pronounced herself divorced from philosophy. For us who continue to examine thought in the philosophical tradition, the question is about the limits of philosophy. We engage philosophical issues from the most profound emotions and motives, but once

³¹ This refers to Schopenhauer's doctrine of compassion in his ethical writings. It is not readily apparent in the main metaphysics.

³² Weil, *Waiting for God (q. v. super)*, Letter V, p. 40.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 34 and 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁵ Richard Bell's *Simon Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, c. 1998) is an attempt to systematize Weil's idea of compassion from her scattered discussions of disinterested attention.

engaged, are we trapped by them? Where Schopenhauer could leave the noumenon on its unknowable own and Wittgenstein bid philosophy to be silent about everything that was greater than the real, Weil found it morally unacceptable not to devote everything to this mystery. The logic of her thought was strangulating, however, so that though it led to divorce it did not lead to freedom from the pressures of compulsive thinking. Rather, it led to something she believed to be freedom of another sort. In her view moral action is supererogatory, or else it is intellectually nothing. The requirement to pass beyond the border of philosophy seems to lift the constraints philosophers argue themselves into and that most everyone allows himself or herself. Her whole mode was what is called overscrupulosity in Catholic casuistry. While Hume found that backgammon and chatting with friends—this might be take-out Thai food, a movie, and some sex for many who read this—relieved him of the strain of thinking through a counter-intuitive view of reality, and while La Mettrie reasoned that to torture ourselves about infinity is folly, something in Weil was enspelled by the light from beyond the horizon.

She argued her way to an extreme full measure of compassion for others along with what seems to us an extreme absence of compassion for herself. People see in Simone what they cannot or will not do; in Weil, what they are entailed by thought or compelled by conscience to do. They stare at Simone because they can both desire it and also push it away.³⁶ She believed that the longer they look at Weil the less they can push away what she says. So Simone not only distracts them, even when they seek uplift, it also reads as justification for distraction—as an argument against that disturbing and inconvenient Weil. There is something wrong in this but something right too. Simone is not a successful argument against Weil. Weil can win on the score of thinking it through as opposed to feeling it out. But Simone in some way is part of the equation, the balance, just as grace can cancel the gravity that pulls us away from morality. Why is the logical part any better than the empirical part?— especially if one believes that deeds are more important than

³⁶ Weil's character as spectacle goes part of the way in explaining the fascination she held for literary people. Alfred Kazin, in *When Writing Was Everything* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995), said that he could not "convey the fanatical, pitiless, totally isolating and self-destructive idealism of this woman. ... although I confess myself relieved never to have met Simone Weil in person, her writing startled and moved me at a time when the war had left me with a painful distrust.... (pp. 92-101). Flannery O'Connor called Weil's life "a perfect blending of the Comic and the Terrible, which two things may be opposite sides of the same coin.... Simone Weil's life is the most comical life I have ever read about and the most truly tragic and terrible" (ed. Sally Fitzgerald, *The Habit of Being* (New York, 1979), pp. 105-106.

words, that how we treat others is more important than theories. In this view, theories are more important only if they can stimulate greater good in other people, at other times, but there's no predicting this except by logic plus the conviction that the logic is perfect and its entailment on human conscience is inevitable. Simone Weil raises the question of how the philosopher is trapped—cut off from ordinary living—by the limits of philosophy with respect both to its employment of critical thought and to the moral and emotional impulses behind philosophical enquiry.

Weil maintained that both philosophy by overall view and philosophy by logical analysis are too narrow. Neither gives us freedom. They tend, instead to put us in the position of making enemies or making friends and of fighting off necessity as our master or of fighting to make it our slave. Something else, she found, is needed to make sense of compassion in a universe of force. Therefore, when she asks us to think about whether she speaks the truth or not, she is asking us not only to refrain from superficiality, and from the consequences of our characters, but also to see that, because both overall view and logical analysis are intertwined, both in root and in practice, nothing we think can make a question of a sort not answerable by them—the supreme spiritual challenge—go away. We can cheat ourselves by logic as easily as by feeling, and hence we need, she maintained, a standard beyond them both.

Weil was right, of course, that we must not decide great matters for trivial reasons or on the basis of feelings without adequate reflection. This was her view, but *in extremis* she was not busy delivering herself of advice to think dispassionately. That too is a triviality. Given that she was a woman who lived a life rich in action and feeling while being “used by intelligence,” something beside good example, which includes our own characters as well as our impression of the character of others, and something beside logical analysis, including her own metaphysics, is needed for understanding the normative force of the sacred and the good. One's view of her beliefs about the balanced nothingness of the world of necessity and the source of reality in God will depend on one's judgment of her metaphysics of participation. Whatever that view, Simone Weil was saying as strongly as she could that everyone faces a spiritual decision. Toward this, in her view, neither feeling nor thinking are sufficient to lead one to the sacred, nor can they together do so. One requires something more, something that enters by grace into the ordinary world

from outside it. Similarly, neither feeling nor thinking nor the two in combination is sufficient to make one good. But what links the sacred and the good? Something else other than feeling and character and other than a logical and critical mind are required in order to be good. Is not being good the most important thing there is, so important as to be sacred? If so, one must think what this other thing is that goodness requires us to find in ourselves. She wanted us to think very hard about finding this if *what she says is true*.

Simone Weil's quasi-gnostic dualism therefore stands as the key issue in answering her testamentary question. It is the actual content of "what she says" that she demands we consider. To an extent she is pointing out how we reduce important questions to trivialities, or to feelings without adequate reflection upon them, yet it is also true that feelings and logic closely mix in us. All of that together, Weil claimed, was less important than the question of that which is spiritually supremely important. If what is supremely important is one's beliefs, and one's belief is that the spiritual is supremely important over against a material world from which it is divided by the thick wall of gnostic dualism, then there is little point to action in this world, absent a successful account of the intermural connection of the two worlds. In this framework, there is no compromise with the world when we act. Normativity is abandoned to supererogation. But if what is supremely important is one's actions in loving kindness and compassion over against theory and talk, then we must look for compromise rather than supererogation in understanding what is good and right and what is bad and wrong. The stronger the separation of spheres in a dualist theory, the more strongly the theory pulls the moral agent to supererogation; and the stronger the unifying side, the more modulation enters the consequent ethical theory.

Weil was both repelled by some things, such as anything luxurious, including food, and yet immersed—as a labor activist, for example, as a farmer for a year, and as a philosopher of craftsmanship—in the making of things that make the world go, also including food. Much of her best work is concerned with explaining how fabrication of things can be spiritual rather than oppressive and how community can be sacred as well as destructive. She sought the solution on the frontier between gravity and grace, to use her most famous terms. This depends in turn on Weil's account of immanence, the precise point at which she turned to metaphor, until she

tried to surpass metaphor to describe a positive content of compassion through the ideas of community and attention. Her death ceased this development, so that we must say that in this sense Simone's ambiguous relationship to the material world was left unresolved by Weil. Attention, mindful creativity, and social connection to others remain her unmaturing ideas of cures for that isolated moral agent which is found first, perhaps, in Schopenhauer, and is often at the center of a range of modern philosophical ethics that ranges from existentialism to a great deal of meta-ethics.

There is a further consequence to this. Without some way of modulating the demands made by normative ideals on mere humans, we rapidly enter the situation of despair and emergency that gripped Weil. Anyone knows that the warrant of heaven has been said to authorize all kinds of things. Weil's Cathars themselves took it in directions ranging from the merely self-indulgent to the quite horrid. With the best intentions and strictest logic, a surfeit of pride in being right leads persons and peoples to the point of self-destruction. If argument for a normative ethics involves the way in which the ideal meets up with this world, it must give us a way to triage the cases with which we are daily presented, without fatal or sinful compromise. This is not to say that it will allow no martyrdom. Rather, this triage as to urgency must be a matter intrinsic to the theory of normative ethics, however absolute the moral principles themselves. Thus, ethical inquiry into the nature of the good is *per se* inquiry into the modulated growth and use of the good in human life. This opens up a great deal of our experiences of things and events to the field of normative ethics.

The enemy of compromise is compulsion. It is a force that has been proven to be the equal of the forces that leads us to compromise—to backgammon and take-out Thai food, to ignoring some evil while fighting others, and to splitting the difference with others in order to do what is better even though it is not best. Compulsion can prevail but only for a while. If compromise represents the necessary forces of coming to be and passing away, compulsion will fall to it and, in a sense, is just another guise in which those forces of necessity operate. When one confronts the necessities of life with rigid obsessive honesty and bone-dry eyes, one will be led to this question: is life worth the cost? Weil's answer is one of the propositions upon which she asks us to make an honest judgment. It is perhaps the chief claim of her life. It seems that she said yes, it is—but only upon a highly sophisticated and conflicted understanding of its terms. Compulsion, however, darkens the contrast of

what one willingly does and what is unwillingly done. This means that the complications in Simone Weil's view of things renders it nearly impossible to answer her testamentary question, however desirable an answer is and however fixedly and irrefutable anyone proves the necessity of an answer to be. It slips up on her ambiguity as to the moral status of our sensibility in a world of objects and events. Yet we must always think with kindness that even the smartest among us may be confused by the richest, fullest, strongest gifts that life gives us.