SIMONE WEIL

CRITIQUE OF RIGHTS AND IMPERSONAL JUSTICE

A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF OBLIGATION

by

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Simone Weil: Spirituality, Rights and Impersonal Justice, A Political Philosophy of Obligation
Thesis directed by Lucy Mcguffey

ABSTRACT

Simone Weil presented a political philosophy informed by her spirituality and was critical of rights. Weil’s critique of rights drew from a critique of the philosophical movement of personalism. Weil argued that basing a political philosophy on rights did not suffice in fulfilling the needs of justice. Her answer to a rights-based political philosophy incorporated elements of Christian spirituality. Weil’s overall thought incorporates a leaning towards what is universal and impersonal regarding individual human experience. This thesis explores the threads of her critique and her alternatives of impersonal justice and an obligation-based political philosophy.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication

Approved: Lucy Mcguffey
### ABBREVIATIONS

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<td>APP</td>
<td>&quot;On the Abolition of all Political Parties&quot;</td>
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<td>DSHO</td>
<td>“Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations”</td>
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<td><em>First and Last Notebooks</em></td>
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Simone Weil can be labeled as a philosopher, mystic, political essayist, factory worker, revolutionary, soldier, journalist, and beloved daughter and sister. She is well known for her spirituality, philosophical essays, and her social activism. She was never an orthodox defender, purveyor or teacher of Gnosticism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism, Marxism or Cartesianism, yet these traditions influenced her thought: “Weil is . . . not a professor of any received doctrine.”1 With striking originality, her work consistently brought to the fore the interconnectedness of individuals and the social groups into which they belonged. Endowed with a powerful intellect, unstoppable drive, and an uncompromising religious faith, Weil additionally had compassion for those suffering by the happenstance of natural occurrence and the dictates of modern society. Through her short life, Weil wrote some fifteen volumes on such varied and interconnected topics as philosophy, science, mathematics, social class, France, history, and Christian spirituality.2 Yet for all her power of thought, interests and accomplishments, Weil never published a finished, or traditionally systematic, catalogue or set of ideas.3

However, Simone Weil was actively thinking and producing her work all her short life. For example, in the months leading up to her death, Weil was in the service of Charles de Gaulle the State Reform Committee for the Free French Forces in London. The Committee was in the process of planning French governance post World War II, including the creation of a new constitution. Weil had been given the job of reviewing certain practical details for post-war

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2 Weil p. 28, from the introduction by Springsted
France, particularly to “tackle something concrete, like trade union problems.” Yet she defied these job expectations. Her work turned out to be an overall criticism of one of the key foundations for developing a liberal democracy, namely a reliance on political rights. Weil contested rights-based political philosophies, their basic premises and values. By challenging the purpose of the Committee, Weil was largely overlooked and most of her work from London was only later published posthumously, post-World War II. These include the book *The Need for Roots* and companion essays such as “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligation” and “Human Personality.” These and others are the focal interest of this thesis. Though directed towards the renewal of France, and by extension Europe, these works spell out Weil’s critique of rights-based doctrines and similar political philosophies as were commonly understood in 1943, and as we understand them today.

**Biographical Sketch**

The following biographical sketch is included in order to illustrate events in Simone Weil’s life that have a clear-cut connection to her overall philosophy. This thesis does not rely on biographical anecdotes; it intends an acute focus on analysis of the subjects of Weil’s philosophy. Yet much of Weil’s life experiences impact the origin and conclusions of her philosophy. We cannot ignore how Weil, throughout her short life, continually strove to incorporate elements of being truthful about her life choices and actions. Her philosophy has origins in her experiences as a factory worker, soldier and her Christian experiences.

Weil had a history of worker-related activism shortly after she graduated. She also had a leftist distrust of technocrat management of industry and factories. However, she was convinced that to really understand worker-related issues, she had to become a worker herself. Weil was

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employed as a laborer for about a year during overlapping months through 1934-35. Though Weil was never a strong individual and the factory work exhausted her. She endured nonstop hours of factory work, being both physically taken advantage of and, in her own summation, deprived of a meaningful everyday existence. It was during this time, “in the factories that Weil first began to develop her concept of affliction.” In her own words, she was "in pieces, soul and body. That contact with affliction had killed my youth.” Likewise the experience destroyed any pretensions she carried prior particularly about romancing the worker’s life or camaraderie. Weil’s conception of affliction is not something she “reasoned.”

A similar approach and experience reaffirmed affliction, though in a different light. Weil retained her perspective of affliction from her factory experience and expanded upon it in the context of war; war may indeed be considered a more intense frame of reference. Weil spent two months (summer 1936) with a leftist and anarchist military faction on the front line of the Spanish Civil War. She entered into service for a cause she believed in, but the experience shattered her ideals. In Spain, she witnessed the dehumanizing effect of war through the brutality of Franco’s fascists, but also through a series of cold-blooded executions committed by the very unit she had joined. A chance accident with cooking oil had Weil unexpectedly leave the unit for hospital treatment. She never returned to front line service, but the circumstance saved her life; the unit she had joined was soon wiped out by fascist forces. Regardless, her time of service still had made its mark and affliction, as she was to extrapolate, had an additional grounding.

The life experiences that brought Simone Weil to Christian spirituality began with impressions she felt while observing Portuguese women sing hymnal chants in 1934, followed by her visit to Assisi in 1937 where, “for the first time,” she felt compelled to get down on her

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5 Pétrement Chapter 8
6 Hollingsworth p. 205
7 WFG p. 25
8 Details of this experience can be found in Pétrement chapter 10.
knees to pray. However, her most personal and moving experience involved a poem by the mystic poet George Herbert. While suffering a debilitating headache (she suffered these headaches all her adult life), in November 1938, she focused herself on Herbert’s “Love III,” reciting it over and over again. In her own words, what followed was, “Christ himself came down and He took me.” Reflecting on the moment, she admits, “in my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God.” Going forward, Weil's writings became more spiritual, a spirituality suffused by Catholicism. She loved the gospels and two of her close associates were Catholic, one a priest, the second a lay theologian. Both of these men encouraged her to officially convert and be baptized by the Church, a move she resisted. Despite this difference of approach to Christianity, they were close enough for her to entrust much of her thought through letters and her notebooks to them. They were impressed with her, recognizing that perhaps the most important aspect regarding her spirituality is that, no matter how she did it, she did not come to her philosophy or conclusions, solely by argument or reason. It came from personal experience, experience that later supported her mature political philosophy with substantial nuance.

As mentioned, Weil later came into service of de Gaulle and the State Reform Committee. The Committee’s approach to creating a new constitution based itself on concepts of human rights founded during the French Revolution. However, Weil was frustrated with her particular postion. She was shuffled aside and felt she wasn’t contributing enough for the war.

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9 ibid p. 307
10 ibid p. 340
11 See Appendix A
12 WFG p. 27
13 WFG p. 27
14 See Letter IV, Spiritual Autobiography WFG p. 21-38
effort.\textsuperscript{15} Although De Gaulle himself was both impressed and nonplussed by Weil,\textsuperscript{16} it is unlikely they met in person. Still, the \textit{intended} audience of her work were members of the Committee even though she was focused on the broader subjects close to her heart: human needs and obligations. By following her own path, Weil's work was largely overlooked at the time, yet it has had an impact that has outlasted the Committee’s immediate constitutional problems.

\textbf{General Origins of Weil’s Philosophy}

Even though she did not publish, Simone Weil did present a consistent political philosophy. Weil's critique of rights can be difficult to appreciate; its a critique that seems to blast apart the foundation of our own society's liberal roots. For Weil, basing a political system on rights did not suffice in fulfilling the needs of justice. As a start, she drew from a critique of the philosophical movement of personalism, yet critiquing its philosophical position was not enough. She was committed to her vision of a just and equitable society by also incorporating elements of her Christian spirituality. Her political philosophy then took on a leaning towards what is spiritual within the human experience. By drawing on religion, Weil passionately argued how what she called impersonal justice ineluctably supersedes individual rights. She created a counterproposal political philosophy that together took the individual’s relationship with society and universal good (God) with an implementation of impersonal justice into an obligation-based doctrine. While she did not come to her conclusions from traditional Catholic dogma or teachings, her Christian understanding of obligation was informed by the Church and with it, a

\textsuperscript{15} Yet Pétrement convincingly portrays how busy Weil \textit{really} was: “The sheer amount of what she wrote in London in a few months is almost beyond belief. She must have written day and night, scarcely taking the time to sleep.” p. 492

\textsuperscript{16} Pétrement tells that Weil first fled France with her parents to America in 1942. She later journeyed alone to London with the explicit hope to contribute in the war against Hitler. Her primary goal was to initiate her plan for “front line nurses,” a plan she had first conceptualized in 1940. The front line nurses were to be the Allies’ counterbalance to Hitler’s SS, a group dedicated to being in the thick of battle, but with the sole purpose of healing, rather than killing and destroying. If she had her way, Weil herself would have led the front line nurses; she wanted a “dangerous job” in the war effort. Yet her hopes were denied. When the plan was presented to de Gaulle, he reportedly replied, “But she is mad!” (p. 514). One of many attempts by Weil to get the front line nurses into action, as well as a complete transcript for the plan can be found in \textit{Seventy Letters}, p. 144-153.
tradition of natural law. Though Weil does not specifically refer to natural law, or to its Catholic advocates such as Thomas Aquinas, she always had in mind tenets that read very similar to the ethics of natural law.

Weil never acceded authority to Church doctrine per se. Her vision for free, equitable, and just, social interactions, by bringing to the fore obligations we should all have for our fellow human beings, was, like natural law, inclusive and not subject to Catholic dogma or creed. Weil was especially critical of dogma that excluded unbaptized individuals from certain Church rituals, i.e. the Eucharist. Still, her philosophy incorporates, or runs parallel to, elements of Natural Law that have deep roots in the Church. Basically, natural law is a “practical philosophy of principles,”17 guided by reason and virtue. Natural law seeks human fulfillment through legal application of universal norms. Natural law seeks nothing other than the fulfillment of the common good: “Aquinas says that the fundamental principle of the natural law is that good is to be done and evil avoided.”18 The end is only achieved by worldly deeds and behaviors based on principles that actuate or bring into being some good to individuals and society. Good is the fundamental element. For advocates of natural law, “good” underscores the reasons or principles for how society should build itself. As human existence has needs for such things as free expression, friendship, food, shelter, warmth, and other basics, society should base itself on attaining these things first as they are “good” for everyone. The “good” precedes what is right and Weil echos the language of Natural Law in her “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligation.” As is discussed in depth later, in chapter three, Weil’s obligations are sourced from human needs and are the moral calling for every individual, yet they reiterate what is the good laid out by natural law. The emergence of rights in modern political thought differs from natural

18 ibid
law to some extent, putting forth instead the individual above society. This political thought did not sit well with Weil and, huddled in her London office, she put together a political vision that shares many similarities to natural law.

Though never compiled into a single treatise, Weil’s political philosophy has a reasoned and consistent direction. The purpose of my thesis is to add to the critical discussion regarding a different form of governance along the lines of Weil’s philosophy. In America, the prioritizing of rights can be an obstacle to a free and equitable society as Weil’s critiques can show. As discussed at length in chapter two, Weil argues against a reliance on rights and at the same time creates new guidelines. I submit that there are theoretically unclear ideas in dispute about good governance when it comes from an unquestioned grounding on rights; moral principles that we value and take for granted, political rights and liberal democracy, face significant challenges. While in a representative democracy we can agree upon minimal obligations, such as to be informed and to engage in political activity (e.g. voting), Weil argues for a universalist and spiritual grounding for governance that carries a deeper, thicker understanding of obligation. As will be examined later in this thesis, I submit there are contemporary societal problems that can be better understood with this deeper understanding in a reading of the political philosophy of Simone Weil. How she supported her view of the inadequacy of a rights-based political philosophy and her alternatives are what my thesis proposes to explore by bringing together the varied threads of her thought. It is arranged in order to illustrate her thought from her Christian spirituality, her critique of rights-based, political philosophies, and how both these themes underscore her alternative obligation-based philosophy. If society based itself on writings like Weil’s we would be more open to prioritizing the needs of the our fellow human beings.
This thesis examines Weil’s political philosophy by explaining how her spirituality shapes important features of her interpretation of politics, justice and governance. There is a creative spark between secular and spiritual aspects of her philosophy. Weil's goal is to place a political philosophy based on human needs and obligations ahead of liberal, rights-based democratic ideals. Therefore, the purpose of my thesis is to investigate and analyze Weil’s philosophy employing the following question: “How did Simone Weil’s formulate her alternative, obligations-based, political philosophy?” Weil formulated her philosophy through a blend of reasoned argument and spiritual sagacity. Using her philosophy, I will scrutinize and test the idea of personal rights, impersonal justice and an obligation-based approach to political philosophy. As her Christian spirituality also deeply impacted her political philosophy, some unpacking of Weil’s spiritual thought will be included, specifically her concepts of affliction and attention. From the core answer of my thesis, I intend to generate an interest in Weil’s assessment of a political philosophy based on human needs.

**Approach and Method**

In order to answer the research question, my approach will be grounded on a qualitative and hermeneutic background understanding of rights, justice, human needs and obligations. Central themes will include her rights critique and the basis of her alternative ideas specifically of impersonal justice and an obligation-based political philosophy. I argue that Weil’s spiritual conceptions of affliction and attention ground her obligation-based political philosophy. Therefore, I examine Weil’s terminology with regard to her spiritual thought in addition to her critique of rights and how these lead to her obligation-based political philosophy. Weil’s terminology infuses her spiritual thought and her critique of rights consistently and these demonstrably flow together towards her alternative political philosophy. When considering
sources for this thesis, such areas of connection and divergence are key and I rely on much of her original work. Yet, my thesis will also include important themes and terms from additional author’s scholarly essays and literature. With this approach, I will organize the information, construct a persuasive and instructive narrative, and support my conclusion.

There has been considerable amount of writing regarding Weil, yet she is not generally well known in twenty-first century America. We continually have to rethink our fundamental political concepts in order to more clearly see from whence we have come and discern whither we are bound. Through Simone Weil, we discover our definitions of rights, democracy, power, and the role of the individual in society, are not fixed, but should at least be continually explored, critiqued and strengthened, if cannot be made final.

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Abbreviations are followed by the source’s page number.

20 Ephrat Livni writes that some 2500 papers have been published about Weil between the years of 1995 and 2012. “Emmanuel Macron surprises even the French with his philosophical references.” Quartz 6 July 2017.
CHAPTER II

WEIL’S SPIRITUALITY

As previously discussed, Simone Weil’s Christian spirituality deeply impacted her political philosophy. This thesis grounds that claim on her spiritual thought, specifically on her concepts of affliction and attention. In a broad scope, Weil had a paradoxical conception about God. This section will begin with exploring her conception of God, but will shift towards affliction and attention.

As Robert Coles observes, “[Weil] isn’t at all interested in the intellectual arguments about whether God ‘really’ exists and how we ‘really’ can distinguish between what we believe and what we, for sure, know to be.” In her spirituality, Weil is not trying to prove theological arguments about the Christian God. Instead, she maintains some paradox about God. For Weil, the ideas grounded on Christian spirituality are as equally valid as the physical laws of our existence. Weil accepts that the distinction between factually knowing and faithfully believing in God’s existence; these are not relevant to her philosophy. On the one hand she writes, “There is a reality outside the world, that is to say outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside and sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties.” On the other hand, with the same conviction, she writes, “The reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts.” For Weil, God may be unprovable through our worldly experience, but “exists” notwithstanding. Her paradoxical spirituality bespeaks of a double vision, one spiritual and the other secular. Weil doesn’t seek to converge her ideas, some how juggle the ideas into one all-embracing theory, nor give priority for one side or the other. Weil holds both concepts equally, the unknowable aspect of God and grounding aspect of his existence. Her ideas may be at odds with each other: “What

22 DSHO p. 132
23 DSHO p. 132
she is grappling with is the fact that Christianity is so deeply opposed to the values of this world that it looks like there can be no compromise between it and them.”  

Yet Simone Weil was not interested in the trappings of intellectual puzzles. Her personal experiences with Christianity confirmed and enhanced aspects of her political philosophy.

Whether or not we believe Weil had an actual encounter with Jesus (as described in the introduction), her spiritual experience was deeply personal. Yet, it is also true that she never lost her focus on the social causes for which she stood; she brought the spiritual to bear onto the secular: “Without question, Weil was somebody who could bring insights together from what to us are often seen as disparate subject matters, and she could then make these insights bear on our present states of affairs.”  

Weil’s spirituality in fact enhanced her more secular, political convictions as can be seen in her actual wording: “The spirit of justice and truth is nothing else but a certain kind of attention, which is pure love.”  

Attention is a concept that will be explored later in this chapter as it is part of her overall political philosophy. Weil’s critique of rights, discussed at length in chapter two, also serves as groundwork for rethinking a liberal democracy’s dependence on a rights-based philosophy and, for that matter, the Committee’s initial constitutional drafts. Yet for a positive approach, one with a solution or vision, Weil’s political philosophy begins with its spiritual components, especially through the themes of affliction and attention. These two themes may appear to have different significance, yet there are also some connecting elements. I begin this chapter with affliction.

**Affliction**

What is affliction? Affliction is a multifaceted and paradoxical concept in Weil’s description of the human experience: “The great enigma of human life is not suffering, but

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24 Hamilton p. 200  
26 HP p. 72
Weil puts forward a forceful and passionate conception of affliction: “It is a death of the soul.” Yet it is also the means by which we connect with God: “It is in affliction itself that the splendor of God’s mercy shines, from its very depths, in the heart of its inconsolable bitterness.” Understanding Weil’s concept begins with how she places affliction into her world vision.

In the original French, Weil’s term is “le malheur.” However, the French doesn’t translate effectively into English in the way she intends, producing such synonyms as adversity, illness, misadventure or misfortune. “Suffering” will also appear as a translation. Although suffering is a primary element for affliction, Weil’s concept goes beyond suffering: “Affliction means physical pain, distress of soul, and social degradation.”

She adds, “Just as truth is a different thing from opinion, so affliction is a different thing from suffering. Affliction is a device for pulverizing the soul; the man who falls into it is like a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cog-wheel.”

Andrea Hollingsworth noted how, “Weil frequently employed imagery of writhing, twisting, and contorting, implying that the only freedom the afflicted possess is the liberty to determine which warped, grotesque movement they will make in response to the anguish.” In other words, affliction strips the individual of freedom, civility, dignity, choice and action, granting only a mechanical and anguished existence. These facets Weil expands upon from her experiences of the factory and of war.

As has already been noted, Weil was employed as a laborer and it is from there her developed conception of affliction began to take shape. Her experience took her by surprise as

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27 LGA p. 43  
28 HP p. 71  
29 WFG p. 44  
30 WFG p. 81  
31 HP p. 70  
32 Hollingsworth, Andrea. “Simone Weil and the Theo-Poetics of Compassion.” (Modern Theology 29.3 July 2013) p. 209
she also understood the social and individual need for work. However, “Simone began to
[instead] feel singled out by affliction and slavery and began to intensely ponder the notions of
justice and equality, rights and obligations, and love for her fellow human beings.”33 Going
forward from her factory experience, when writing about affliction, Weil would freely use the
term “slavery”: “[Affliction] is quite a different thing from simple suffering. It takes possession
of the soul and marks it through and through with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery.”
Weil’s experience was a kind of “slaving” away for a pittance, for she worked hard and long,
but had no remnants of happiness or meaningfulness through the labor. Her only purpose was to
serve the factory, not serve herself. Quoting from antiquity, she adds, “A man loses half his soul
the day he becomes a slave.”35 The slave is stripped of his humanity, he is afflicted, yet being a
slave is not the sole route towards affliction.

“War is affliction.”36 From her experience in Spain, she concluded, “when once a certain
class of people has been placed by the temporal and spiritual authorities outside the ranks of
those whose life has value, then nothing comes more naturally to men than murder.”37 War is not
the factory, yet its power for submission afflicts its participants. Soldiers become “machines”
(objects), stripped of their humanity by circumstance and cannot distinguish justice from the
abuse of power. In 194038 Weil published her well-known literary criticism on Homer, “The
Iliad, or the Poem of Force.” In the work, affliction was further associated with her concepts of
force and necessity:39 “The reality of this world is necessity. The part of man which is in this

33 Willox p. 58
34 LGA p. 41
35 LGA p. 41
36 SL p. 137
37 SL p. 108
38 ibid p. viii
39 Weil’s use of “necessity” can be understood as her assertion of the worldly, facticity of human existence. Weil
poses that the totality of our bodily life experience is deterministic and fatalistic. Affliction is replete with necessity as it is
world is the part which is in bondage to necessity and subject to the misery of need.” Elsewhere she added, “Affliction means first of all necessity.” In the context described in the *Iliad*, Weil maintains that force is the poem’s overriding theme through the mechanism of war; “[it] turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing.” Whether in battle or not, force permeates the characters of the *Iliad* in every interpersonal interaction, within a collectivity or just between two individuals. For the victor or the defeated, force subjects all to the whims of chance: “The progress of the war in the *Iliad* is simply a continual game of seesaw.” Within a few of Homer’s lines, an army’s successful offensive will turn into a repulsed rout. Chance, under the precepts of necessity, is an inescapable part of our existence; it reveals a double edge of force. Winners become losers, losers become victors. Through force, we are deprived of mercy, pity, compassion and “human suffering is laid bare.” War and “violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch.” From what she witnessed in Spain, Weil asserts force is the obliteration of the human being, turning him/her into a machine bent on killing or being killed. Whether as oppressor or victim, becoming soulless is a key component of the affliction of war.

Christopher Benfey observed, “Weil’s [factory and war] experiences . . . confirmed her growing convictions regarding the dehumanizing effects of modern industrialization and war.” Affliction takes possession of one’s agency and in its place, makes man an object sans subject. Through affliction, the human individual has been socially degraded and humiliated; the individual morphs into a thing, voiceless and spiritless: “Those who endure it are turned to

imposed inescapably upon the sufferer. Necessity is also synonymous with Weil’s use of the terms “force” and “gravity.” “All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity” (GG p. 1 italics in text)

40 DSHO p. 135
41 SL p. 179
42 IPF p. 3, italics in text
43 IPF p. 16
44 IPF p. 34
45 IPF p. 20
stone.” The soul is lost, forlorn. More than just a victim of fate, the implicit needs of the afflicted are passed over by the “force” of the world. But rather than despair, affliction serves as a basis for understanding God and for Weil’s conception of social justice.

In Weil’s philosophy, the paradox of comes through with a double meaning, one worldly (or political), the other spiritual. Concerning the latter, affliction is a gift of God, one that is hard to accept or understand; this gift still contains all the dehumanizing suffering just described, yet it is also a gift from God. In Weil’s conception, few are capable of truly experiencing this gift, or use, of affliction, because understanding begins with a deep compassion: “[A] divine love which one touches in the depth of affliction [is] like Christ’s resurrection through crucifixion, that love which is central core and intangible essence of joy, [and] is not a consolation. It leaves pain completely intact.” God’s love comes, paradoxically, through in extreme affliction, “a ‘marvel of divine technique,’ the means of engaging in a transforming experience of God.” Affliction is a component of divine love because, “When His grace penetrates to the very center of a man and from there illuminates all his being.” Even in the throws of deep affliction, God is present.

Stuart Jesson discusses Weil’s affliction in the light of a dialogue on theodicy. Theodicy is the branch of theological discourse on justifying or vindicating God in light of the existence of evil. Weil herself does not specifically address or use the term “theodicy,” nor does she equate affliction with evil in a theological sense. Jesson demonstrates Weil’s spiritual approach contains important elements of theodicy as it is “centered in finding God present in and through suffering.” Jesson further asserts that theological positions on theodicy that do not take Weil’s

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47 IPF p. 26
48 SL p. 142
49 Jesson p. 197
50 LGA p. 49
affliction\textsuperscript{52} into consideration fail to fully encompass the human condition: “Weil’s basic conviction [is] that suffering, especially in its most extreme forms, is both a brutal reality that means nothing, gives nothing, and sheds no light.” It is not a divine compensation, such as everlasting Heaven, yet it is salvation, paradoxically a salvation that only begins when an individual is afflicted. In affliction, we are driven towards God. At once, we are afflicted and God’s love is both intimately near and infinitely separate: “It is in the deepest depth of my misery that I touch God.”\textsuperscript{53}

Though Jesson faithfully disseminates Weil’s conception of affliction, his discussion doesn’t address Weil’s more secular or social account of the human experience. As an avenue of salvation or otherwise, Weil never lost sight of her concerns for the facticity of living in the world, nor the despairing role affliction has within it. Much of her writing about affliction deals with concepts of salvation and God’s love, yet she equally emphasized its cruelty: “One should not speak to those in affliction about the kingdom of God, it is too remote from them . . . the very suffering which inspires horror, which we endure against our will, which we seek to escape, which we beg to be spared.”\textsuperscript{54} Weil deplored the suffering of humankind. All her life she showed extraordinary empathy and this is reflected through her writings:

> “The combination of personal experience and sympathy for the wretched mass of people around me, in which I formed, even in my own eyes, an undistinguished item, implanted so deep in my heart the affliction of social degradation that I have felt a slave ever since, in the Roman sense of the word.”\textsuperscript{55}

Out of this paradoxical understanding emerges her conception of justice. Weil not only acknowledges suffering and affliction as components towards compassionate thinking, they are also unacceptable when not addressed. Affliction leads to justice through an application of

\textsuperscript{52} Unlike Weil, Jesson employs the words “suffering” and “affliction” interchangeably, often preferring the former. For Jesson, they have the same meaning.
\textsuperscript{53} FLN p. 83
\textsuperscript{54} FLN p. 82
\textsuperscript{55} SL p. 140
compassion and by a call to alleviate it: “In an important sense, the ability to recognize some suffering as intolerable, unexplained and unjustified becomes a criterion for judging beliefs.”\(^{56}\)

Though in many respects, she held that affliction, through necessity, is a universal aspect of the human life, Weil also acknowledged that we all don’t suffer extreme affliction, something she exemplified by Jesus on the cross. Still, it has an important aspect: “Affliction is one principal route into the impersonal (and therefore goodness and love).”\(^{57}\) It is through this connection to the impersonal that links affliction with attention.

Attention

Like affliction before, this section provides the preliminary background for understanding Weil’s conception of attention and how it fits into her world vision and her political philosophy. Unlike affliction, which begins with what is “happening” to an individual, attention is a giving of an individual: “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”\(^{58}\) Simone Weil wrote this often quoted line in a letter to her close friend, Joë Bousquet, a man afflicted by paralysis from wounds he suffered during World War I. Weil was appreciative of Bousquet for reading a group of her poems. Yet always being mindful of the words she chose when writing, Weil was both thanking and acknowledging how Bousquet “had paid real attention” to her work. In other words, he had given himself in the act of reading. Weil appraises attention as a superior act of an individual will. Yet “will” is not precisely the best descriptor. A certain amount of personal choice and action does apply, but attention is also an act of spiritual growth of the highest degree, growth that is difficult, if not impossible to achieve. It is attainable, but it takes trial and practice: “It is given to very few minds to notice that things and beings exist.”\(^{59}\)

\(^{56}\) Jesson p. 198  
^{57} Hamilton p. 199  
^{58} Pétrement p. 462  
^{59} ibid p. 462
ceased scrutinizing the importance of attention especially as her writings became increasingly more spiritual.

An example of developing the capacity of attention Weil likens to students studying with extreme focus a difficult lesson. Attention is both the activity and the reward for such study. Attention in the school setting is not to be understood as an act of choice or will that can be imposed by the teacher or even by the student:

“If one says to one’s pupils: ‘Now you must pay attention,’ one sees them contracting their brows, holding their breath, stiffening their muscles. . . [Yet] they have not been paying attention. . . This kind of muscular effort in work is entirely barren.”

In other words, cramming may be useful solely for the purpose of a passing grade, but it lacks the depth of experience Weil compares to true attention. Though “cramming” and “extreme focus” are both actions of choice, and can thereby be umbrellaed under a broad definition of “will,” there is a distinction about how they are undertaken. The former is ego or self driven, the latter is a release of the self. Pure academic study is analogous to the elements included in the concentration on something other than the self (it additionally bolsters the ability to pray). Indeed, passing or failing grades are equal if the effort of attention is pure: “It does not even matter much whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the [lesson], although it is important to try really hard to do so. Never in any case whatever is genuine effort of the attention is wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane.” Adding to her idea, in a second letter to Bousquet she wrote, “I was sustained be the faith, which I acquired at the age of fourteen, that no true effort of attention is ever wasted, even though it may never have any visible result, either direct or indirect.” Weil is highlighting the potential of school work as more than just an instrumental activity, designed for the “dream job.” Weil holds the cultivating

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60 WFG p. 60-61
61 WFG p. 58, italics mine
62 SL p. 140
of attention to be the highest aspiration for the schooling of our youths: “Happy then are those
who pass their adolescence and youth in developing this power of attention.” 63 Whereas much
schooling is deemed important because of the content of the class, Weil holds the institution to a
different standard. Schools should indeed have classes that teach subjects, yet schools should
also foster the extreme focus and spiritual dimension of attention.

As such, attention is not is some sort of willed effort by the ego per se. Ego here is to be
understood to be that part of us that designates self-identity and controls worldly actions: “The
will only controls a few movements of a few muscles, and these movements are associated with
the idea of the change of position of nearby objects.” 64 By contrast, “attention consists of
suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated.” 65 Attention
enables us to be selfless; to empty our selves. A robust faculty of attention fends off worldly
distractions; it leads to a transcendence beyond the world and into the impersonal. The individual
surrenders one’s finite ego, the personal gives way to the impersonal: “There is no entry into the
transcendent until the human faculties — intelligence, will, human love — have come up against
a limit, and the human being waits at this threshold, which he can make no move to cross,
without turning away and without knowing what he wants, in fixed, unwavering attention.” 66 It is
not a salvation as traditionally understood. Through attention, Weil articulates a principal
ingredient of prayer: “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” 67 Prayer is an active openness, a
seeking out, towards and for God: “God is attention without distraction.” 68 Thus fostering prayer
with a faculty of undistracted attention opens the soul to God’s presence and facilitates the love
of God: “The quality of attention counts as much in the quality of the prayer. . . The highest part

63 WFG p. 64
64 GG p. 116
65 WFG p. 62
66 FLN p. 335
67 GG p. 117
68 FLN p. 141
of the attention only makes contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established, but the whole attention is turned toward God.”69 In its social context, attention is made manifest in turning towards others. The combination of releasing one’s own self, and giving attention towards others is how Weil further grounds her political philosophy.

Attention leads to the ability to empathize with others. There has to be a true effort on the part of the individual to recognize the needs of others. Through her political philosophy, Weil offered a vision for how such a society can be accomplished. Oppressed and marginalized individuals may indeed have no need for anything else but people capable of giving them real attention; it serves as a basis of an egalitarian, more just society. Attention is one substantial element for the love of our neighbor. Weil admits that the capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is difficult thing. It is impersonal in that it is a release of self and a turn towards others. Warmth of heart and good deeds of charity are not enough; proud boasting, whether aloud or in silence by those who think they have the capacity of attention do not possess it. Attention is at the heart of her obligation-based political philosophy. Although Weil’s conception of obligation is developed later in this thesis, here it is important to understand that it is grounded upon impersonal aspects of attention.

**Summation**

In this chapter, I here argued that understanding Weil’s political philosophy is substantially augmented by an understanding her conceptions of affliction and attention. These are notably different themes in tone, but not completely separate: “The attention demanded by the affliction of others is such that there is no room for any other object.”70 Both affliction and attention invoke a certain emptying out of one’s ego. One’s self is either stripped away through

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69 WFG p. 57 Simone Weil’s conception of prayer differs from the traditional Christian understanding in one notable aspect. Traditional prayer is practiced as a person-to-God dialogue of thankfulness and humble petition. Yet for Weil, God is absent from the world, so prayer is not a dialogue, but instead an active receptivity.

70 Jesson p. 199
affliction or is given up through focus of others. Weil applies affliction and attention into an obligation-based political philosophy with a focus on suffering (affliction) and the needs of others (attention). Attention and affliction underscore the recognition of an individual’s obligations towards others. As is further explored in chapter three, it is the role of good governance to address obligation, to alleviate suffering and needs, and bring about justice. Even though these ideals can also be applied to any liberal society, it is the rights-based approach to them fails for Weil. A rights-based approach lacks the spiritual and impersonal aspects Weil includes. It is through her critique of rights where Weil further elucidates her alternative obligation-based political philosophy. Rights are personal, self-centered. Hence, her political philosophy also includes a strong critique of rights.
CHAPTER III
RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

In this chapter, I will describe Weil’s critique of rights, her conception of impersonal justice and their importance in her political philosophy. A rights-based political philosophy lacks the spiritual dimension Weil so closely attributes to an egalitarian society. Without a grounding on the impersonal, on human affliction or attention towards others, Weil sharply criticizes a rights-based approach. An examination of Weil’s objections to a rights-based political philosophy can begin with her essay “Human Personality” which states her criticism of the philosophical position of personalism. Weil asserts that a human being is more than an individual “personality” as proposed by personalism. Weil instead argues that humans inherently possess a preeminent universality, which transcends the specifics of person and circumstance. Rights are argued to be personal, individual possessions and a political philosophy with an emphasis on rights only suffices for individuals able to actualize their rights. A just, equitable society, the goal and intention of a rights-based political philosophy, can be circumvented by an emphasis on the individual. Individuals unable to actualize their rights instead become marginalized and suffer injustice within the liberal societies in which they live. Rights become personal claims, socially acceptable forms of justice, that are biased against what she termed “impersonal justice.” For Weil, justice is instead found in universal, impersonal aspects of our humanity. I begin this chapter examining personalism, followed by what is a rights-based political philosophy, Weil’s critique of rights, and how justice does not abide in personal rights.

Personalism and the Impersonal

In “Human Personality,” Weil’s objections to a rights-based, political philosophy begin with her rejection of personalism. Personalism did not suit her: “[There] is something amiss with the vocabulary of the modern trend of thought known as personalism.” What personalism sets out to answer is the question of the basis for the individual, the particular man and his role in society. Defining ourselves through personalism struck Weil as particularly impermanent and shallow. She did not grant personalism any hegemony over how we should interact within society. To understand this critique, we have to first understand what Weil meant by “person” via personalism and contrast that to what she means by “human.”

Personalism is a branch of philosophy originating as a counter to certain nineteenth century “dehumanizing” strains of thought such as evolution or idealism. Like existentialism, personalism emphasizes on the “existence” of the person as a free agent, meaning persons determine their own life experience through freely selected choices. Personalism’s salient focus is on the singular psychological experience of the individual. What distinguishes the person is how an individual finds fulfillment through an embodied life. He is subjective yet situated within a social community. Christopher Hamilton observes, “Personalism attributes to each human being a metaphysical center, constituted by his or her personality.” One’s person is what distinguishes him, one’s person gives meaning of his self in contrast to others. The person is set

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72 HP p. 50
74 ibid p. 38
75 Hamilton, Christopher. “Simone Weil’s ‘Human Personality’: Between the Personal and the Impersonal.” (The Harvard Theological Review 98.2 April 2005) p. 188, italics mine
to the individual’s unique situation including “one’s social or legal role or status.” The person is an amalgamation of a variety of non-linear character parts, as seen from both the perspectives of the individual and society. One’s family, education, social class, financial security, as well as one’s lived choices, actions and consequences, come together to form the person. By defining the elements of ourselves through personalism, hinging on the historical acts and thoughts of the individual, we are cast solely within our particular situation. Weil’s interpretation of personalism is grounded on the idea of our personhood as a metaphor, comparing us to actors on stage performing our various roles. In other words, Weil understands personalism as a specious aspect of understanding ourselves: “One’s person also refers to one’s individuality, one’s singularity, one’s difference from others.” Critiquing this definition, Weil instead affirms that our humanity should not be attached to individual roles or social status.

In particular, Weil has the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier in mind with regard to her critique. Following personalism’s thread, Mounier emphasized that an individual’s life is one of activity, free and creative “as the human being’s mode of existence.” Mounier also sought to combine elements of Christian dogma, namely that man is created in God’s image, with liberal democracy. Therefore, Mounier gave primacy to political rights based on this Christian ideal of man and integrating liberalism’s doctrine of the autonomy of the individual. By contrast, Weil maintained that the writings of Mounier misrepresented an individual’s rights and moral obligations: “Weil thought personalism to be a marriage of

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77 ibid p. 62-63
78 ibid p. 67, Weil does not name Mounier in “Human Personality” nor in any of the other essays referred to in this thesis. There is no primary source, however, Andrew draws the conclusion that Weil was responding to Mounier in her essay as he was a well known supporter of personalism.
79 Lee p. 39
80 ibid p. 38
convenience which cuts both [Christianity] and liberalism off from their essential roots.”\textsuperscript{81} What is sacred in a human being is something more substantial than what is unique in each of us, or in the sum of our various roles. As is explored shortly, Weil explicitly holds this sacred aspect of ourselves as something “impersonal,” universal in humanity, but not in personality or personhood. In Weil’s view, Mounier’s understanding of the language of Christianity and liberalism is at the heart of her criticism of his personalism.\textsuperscript{82}

Weil also objects to the emphasis that personalism places on fractional elements even though the philosophy does not deny that there are ubiquitous aspects of our human experience. Christopher Hamilton lists some of these, such as “sexual desire or hunger or the need to sleep or the desire for pleasure as these characterize human life — the kinds of motives that we all share, to a greater or lesser extent, that explain (large parts of) our behavior.”\textsuperscript{83} These are traits that direct thoughts into action. Yet while these may help explain a person’s behavior, for Weil personalism is still a descriptor of separate components, like comparing us to particleboard, a compressed product of random wood chips and resin. True understanding of one’s humanity is not found piecemeal.

Weil asserts there is something that is sacrosanct and inviolate in every human being. That “something,” she argues with special accentuation, is that one’s merit or value is underscored by universal, hallowed aspects, by “something” that is impersonal. From her perspective, what is impersonal is not to be confused with commonly applied synonyms such as unbiased, detached, disinterested, aloof, distant, unfeeling, or indifferent. Personalism, she argues, misplaces the primacy of personal aspects attributable to all people under a delusion of

\textsuperscript{81} Andrew p. 67
\textsuperscript{82} Andrew p. 67
\textsuperscript{83} Hamilton p. 190
what should be understood as “the authentic sense of the sacred” For Weil, the sacred and the impersonal are not found in our contingent façade, social role or legal status: “At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably . . . that is sacred in every human being.” Also, “So far from it’s being his person, what is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him. Everything which is impersonal in man is sacred, and nothing else.”

In “Human Personality,” Weil doesn’t overuse the word “soul,” but she does attribute her concept to the human soul. Weil’s Christian spirituality is not preoccupied with the traditional meaning for “soul” as a separate, incorporeal essence of the human being, subject to judgment for eternal paradise or damnation. The soul’s potential afterlife is not a topic of concern for Weil. Salvation has a totally different connotation and, as has been shown, is inexorably linked with affliction. Indeed for Weil, the soul is instead irrevocably connected to the human body and an immortal essence:

“Humility consists of knowing that in this world the whole soul, not only what we term the ego in its totality, but also the supernatural part of the soul . . . is subject to time and to the vicissitudes of change. There must be absolute acceptance of the possibility that everything natural in us should be destroyed. But we must simultaneously accept and repudiate the possibility that the supernatural part of the soul should disappear.”

Soul is impersonal, universal, unimpeachable and not unique or distinctive via the person; it is the source of all good in us. Even by not consistently repeating the term “soul,” Weil accents her points about the personalism and the impersonal. Weil’s conception of the impersonal in humanity serves as a basis for her universalist approach to human identity and experience, by connecting us together. There is a worldly implication that also serves as a basis for universal

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84 HP p.58
85 HP p. 51, italics mine
86 HP p. 54
87 HP p. 51, italics mine
88 WFG p. 150
justice. For Weil, we should value each other because of this sacred universality, not from anything specious or particular. All differentiation between people is secondary, if not outright wrong-headed. Nothing peculiar about you is really about who you are as a human.

To illustrate, Weil exemplifies via personalism a hypothetical scenario consisting of a random man and an act of violence: “He has long arms, blue eyes, and a mind whose thoughts I do not know, but perhaps they are commonplace.” From personalism’s perspective alone, Weil asserts she could do violence towards him and not impact his person: “If it were the human personality in him that was sacred to me, I could easily put out his eyes. As a blind man he would be exactly as much a human personality as before.” Within Weil’s scenario, she affirms that the reason she does not commit such a violent act is not based on his person: “What would stay [my hand] is the knowledge that if someone were to put out his eyes, his soul would be lacerated by the thought that harm was being done to him” (he is being afflicted). Weil maintains that the soul of each of us is the source of what is good in us. Harming this man is an act of evil. Therefore, in no way is Weil attempting to create a justification for any random violence towards others; she is certainly conscious of the many problems of a such laissez-faire and sadistic morality. Rather, Weil asserts her position that humans are more than their physical or psychological parts as described solely through the philosophy of personalism. By itself, personalism cannot be the grounds for morality, justice, or a political philosophy because of the impersonal sanctity of the human being:

“When Weil claims, then, that it is the impersonal in the human being that is sacred, what she means, I think, is that there is a kind of love — a kind of attention — in the light of which it is possible to see human beings as sacred.”

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89 HP p. 50
90 HP p. 51
91 HP p. 51
92 Hamilton p. 193
Weil asserts that it is the impersonal that is the source of the sanctity of the human being, whole and in total. Weil would not commit a random act of violence upon a fellow human solely for the reasons of their impersonal soul, for sanctity, love and good, and how she defines injustice and oppression.\textsuperscript{93}

As we have seen in her analysis of affliction and attention, Weil’s critique of personalism is not about psychological truths per se: “We should see her as inviting us into a distinctive ethical perspective on human life and human beings.”\textsuperscript{94} Weil’s focus is on the human as a whole being; love, respect, and fidelity, are grounded on the whole being. Coupled with her concept of the impersonal, Weil’s argument against personalism questions a fidelity we may have towards others based solely on superficial characteristics or social bonds. But she refutes such an attitude and the consequences of maintaining a political philosophy based on it: “Particularly striking is Weil’s spirited rejection of a conception of justice based on a conception of mutual respect for persons (the subjects or bearers of rights).”\textsuperscript{95} Thus, Weil’s critique of personalism also grounds her critique of rights.

**Rights and its Critique**

Simone Weil took a stand against the political philosophy that is deeply embedded in French, and by extension, Western society. Weil held unorthodox ideas regarding human rights. For Weil, rights are ineffective, unequal to the task of fair and distributive justice. Rights are “claims of possessive individuals against others rather than entitlements of members of a moral community to things.”\textsuperscript{96} Indeed, “The notion of rights, which was launched into the world in

\textsuperscript{93} Justice, injustice and oppression are subjects I expand upon later in this thesis.
\textsuperscript{94} ibid p. 192
\textsuperscript{95} Andrew p. 60, italics mine
\textsuperscript{96} ibid p. 60, italics in quote
1789, has proved unable, because of its intrinsic inadequacy, to fulfill the role assigned to it."

In this section, I will discuss Weil’s understanding and her critique of rights. Picking up from her critique of personalism, I will explore Weil’s questioning of the hegemony of rights and a potential abuse of power through rights. Weil also critiques rights for economic or commodity related reasons and as the grounding of social morality on the whole. These elements have some overlapping features.

A baseline for what is a right and what is the outcome of a political philosophy based on rights follows one commonly accepted tradition begun by John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant and others. According to this tradition, rights are commonly held as the moral grounding for liberal societies. By virtue of societal membership, rights are entitlements and privileges granted to individual citizens; they are the political power to engage or not to engage in certain agreed upon creeds, activities or conducts: “Human rights are norms that help to protect all people everywhere from severe political, legal, and social abuses. . . . Rights exist in morality and in law at the national and international levels.” They are contractual protections from unsolicited infringement or encroachment by government authority and other members of society. A rights-based philosophy underscores the beliefs about what is moral in society, what is allowable in society, what is justice in society, and what is legitimate authority in society. Through these beliefs, a rights-based political philosophy is one basis for a liberal formulation of power, laws and government institutions. In a sense, a society giving credence to a rights-based political philosophy endorses a wide level of freedom for its citizens curtailed only by a common agreement for the equality of rights for others.

97 HP p. 51
The elements of Weil’s critique of rights this thesis will include are how rights are: personal, seen as possessions, disproportionally actualized, that the language of rights has dominated discourse of morality and that political parties tend to aggravate the adverse effects. Being personal, rights become claims without recognizing obligation. This leads to a possessive quality. Despite language about rights being “inalienable,” rights can in fact be taken away or otherwise unequally distributed based on the context of the situation and power. Yet all of that can be difficult for an individual to challenge given that the discourse of rights is so much in control of what society thinks and acts upon.

So by being critical of rights, Weil’s thinking seems to be illiberal and out of step with common, political motifs, and the Committee, namely that rights do serve as the foundation of good governance and a constitution. Weil was indeed accentuating a particular element, but she was not categorically or dogmatically opposed to a free and liberal government. Weil presented and recognized the dangers of “an expansive and rootless liberalism, an empire of human rights.” Through liberalism, government has historically led to the applied injustice of rights-based politics discussed in the previous section. Yet Weil would not surrender the freedoms that serve as the foundation of a liberal government. By one traditional approach, the starting point of a liberal government is an acceptance that “state of nature in which humans are free and equal.” A liberal government (liberalism) is understood to be one based on a political philosophy both grounded by, and propagating the, freedom of the individual. It must justify any limits to a citizen’s freedom and protect his political and civil liberties. A liberal government has historically been structured by a system of laws with the end goal of free, self-determination of its citizens; it will generally include rights-based language. Liberalism promotes and defends the

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99 Andrew p. 88
role of government as primary for attaining equality within society. A liberal government has historically supported a capitalist economy\textsuperscript{101} and does not intrude into a private citizen’s property ownership as doing so violates an ideal of social or economic equality beholden to individual citizen’s free actions and choices. In this context, liberalism is a primary alternative to forms of authoritative government that may use force and mandate in order to determine the lives of citizens and the goals of society. For many on the Committee, totalitarianism was in fact the sole, political enemy of the war. Regardless, even with totalitarianism as the in fact, war-time enemy, Weil did not dampen her overall critique of a rights-based political philosophy. Despite liberalism’s promise, its application in the political system of France brought out some of Weil’s sharpest criticism.

Particularly, Weil was deeply suspicious of political parties. She never argued that her obligation-based political philosophy could emerge from the party system France had in place. Her scathing essay, “On the Abolition of all Political Parties” makes her position quite clear: “The institution of political parties appears to be an almost unmixed evil. They are bad in principle, and in practice their impact is noxious.”\textsuperscript{102} She expands on characteristics she attributes to political parties, namely they are “a machine” of and for collective passions, peer pressure and goals of unlimited growth in power.\textsuperscript{103} By pursuing its purpose, a political party exists by propaganda and “[kills] in all souls the sense of truth and justice.”\textsuperscript{104} Even within a liberal, democratic society, a country whose political system consists of parties there is a

\textsuperscript{101} It is outside the scope of this thesis to explore the roles of different forms of governments and their applications of different economic theories. One can argue that a liberal government can exist without supporting or promoting Capitalism. However, Weil’s philosophy is notably also a reaction against a capitalist economy. Her essays consistently show how Weil objected to the power and influence of money in society: “In Weil’s view of a just society, money (or the power to make demands effective) would have a smaller role in allocating material goods and services, in the distribution of political offices and responsibilities, and in access to cultural resources than it does in societies regulated by the principle of consumer sovereignty.” (Andrew p. 82)

\textsuperscript{102} APP p. 32

\textsuperscript{103} APP p. 11

\textsuperscript{104} APP p. 17
“tendency . . . towards totalitarianism.”

Citizens wishing to play a role in social affairs have to surrender some of their ideas of good governance when joining a party. It was Weil’s hope for citizens participating in democracy that a candidate or issue would be judged or voted upon based on individual fluidity or merit, on its circumstance or context, rather than a political party’s stance. Yet as much as political parties do not ground Weil’s political philosophy, nor do rights. Political parties are often claimants of rights and to that end, Weil has a double criticism.

The concept of a right tends to remain largely intact in all political parties as with popular social circles and media of Western, liberal societies. This brings to focus how a supposed right should be accepted as an instance of what is morally “right.” For example, the right to freedom of speech, laid out by the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, could be subject to criticism on the grounds that perhaps there exists a moral stance which serves as a contradiction to that right. Does the right to freedom of speech, as laid out in the amendment, include the espousing ideology of White supremacy exemplified by the Ku Klux Klan? Regardless of any legal or legislative outcome that may result from this question, Americans expect the positive and general understanding of personal rights will continue to remain intact; a clear distinction between rights and what is morally right may be left hanging. However, for Weil, a discussion on morality, and by extension justice, must be distinguished from a debate over rights that may result from this example. Weil instead asserts that debates over rights have “been turned into a shrill nagging of claims and counter-claims, which is both impure and unpractical.”

For Weil, rights just do not produce or ground morality; they produce a rationale for groups or individuals to assert themselves and their causes over what is good for all.

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105 APP p. 15
106 HP p. 64
As previously discussed, one key element to Weil’s critique on rights is her rejection of understanding rights through personalism: “The notion of rights, by its very mediocrity, leads on naturally to that of the person, for rights are related to personal things.”\textsuperscript{107} Regarding rights, Weil asserts, “It is much worse still if the word ‘personal’ is added to the word ‘rights’, thus implying the rights of the personality.”\textsuperscript{108} By attributing rights to the person, using Weil’s example of gouging out a man’s eyes, rights can be taken away from individuals and have no ill effect. Rights are not an sacred aspect of being human and taking them away illustrates how the give-and-take of rights does not serve as the moral grounding Weil would accept in a political society. Aside from personalism, there are other aspects of rights to which Weil objects.

Instead of affirming a primacy to rights, Weil asserts that exchanges between individuals about rights become contests of power rather than grounding for justice: “Rights in Weil’s view, are social privileges which reinforce, rather than limit, the prevailing structures of power in a commercial society.”\textsuperscript{109} With primacy not affirmed, political dialogue shifts away from the equality of rights for all and is replaced by a babble of shouting: “Words like ‘I have the right . . .’ or ‘you have no right to . . .’ evoke a latent war and awaken the spirit of contention.”\textsuperscript{110} A rights-based society adheres to the notion that individuals have rights, but if one’s rights conflict with the rights of another, the result may well end up in a legal system where rights are levied by judicial power or force. For Weil, such force does not necessarily equate with justice. By force, “rights are always asserted in a tone of contention; and when this tone is adopted, it must rely upon force in the background, or else it will be laughed at.”\textsuperscript{111} A rights claimant may lack recognition, empathy or respect for another’s contested claims. Thereby rights, as in our rights,
can thereby transfer into the legalities of “our laws and their laws” 112 which can sustain an unequal allocation of justice. Universal justice may be sacrificed. The dilemma is increased when the international legalisms of refugee status come into play:

“Talk of the rights of stateless persons becomes idle if no state is prepared to accord them the legal rights it extends to its own citizens, in which case it might just be better to drop talk of human rights and speak of the unjust treatment of certain individuals.” 113

For a stateless person, rights as they are applied, could instead lead to a tumult that can push them legally out of the picture. When Weil writes "a right is not effectual by itself" 114, she is drawing attention to how rights can become contingent within circumstances of a social context. The application of rights is not revered as the primary, universal or inalienable characteristic of human beings.

Weil argues the linkage between the person and the right is a linkage of ownership; rights are personal property: “Persons are defined as possessors of rights, and rights are the expectations, claims or entitlements of persons (legal and moral).” 115 For Weil, this is a substantial weakness. Andrew points out how Weil understands rights in Lockean terms: “For Locke as for Weil, what is personal is alienable, a marketable commodity.” 116 One hundred years before the French Revolution, Locke asserted in his Two Treatises of Government that one of the sole objectives of government was to ensure the right to pursue, and also to protect, the ownership of personal property, which, next to life and liberty, he labeled as a person’s “estate.” 117 So, by connecting rights to the person, does Locke asserts they are subject to barter? On one hand Locke asserts that a person's rights (and talents and abilities) are inalienable; they are the indisputable property of the person. Yet he also asserts how a person can by an act of free

112 Andrew p. 65
113 Hamilton p. 197
114 NR p. 3
115 Andrew p. 62
116 ibid p. 65
117 Locke, John. Two Treatises on Government. (London: George Routledge and Sons Limited) Sec. 87 p. 234
will, "[give] a Right of Property, where-ever any one was pleased to employ it."\textsuperscript{118} For example, a person can become a laborer \textit{for} another person, employing his abilities not for himself, but alienating them for another. So for Locke a personal aspect can be alienable. Weil pushes the argument one step further and as such, rights too can be bartered: “The notion of rights is linked with the notion of sharing out, of exchange, of measured quantity. It has a commercial flavor, essentially evocative of legal claims and arguments.”\textsuperscript{119} In this respect, rights are not an inalienable birthright for humans. Like Locke, the language of the French Revolution considered the pursuit of property as inalienable. However, as Weil points out, in practice rights retain a bargaining aspect:

“If the words have meaning, when the men of 1789 declared property sacred, along with liberty, they defined it as inalienable and withdrew it from the sphere of trade. But facts have demonstrated that the words have no meaning.”\textsuperscript{120}

With the “bargaining spirit”\textsuperscript{121} injected into the formation of rights, Weil asserts that the men of the French Revolution in fact authorized a commercial value, a give-and-take feature, to rights. The appearance of how rights serve as an inalienable and equitable grounding for society reveals in practice how they can be unequally actuated or acquired.

Weil’s objection on moral grounds is based on how rights may supersede any duty or obligation the rights bearer may have towards others: “Indeed one of the main reason she rejects rights-based conceptions of justice is that rights fundamentally presuppose the choice or option of whether or not to come to the aid of the needy.”\textsuperscript{122} For Weil, it is never a matter of choice, whether or not to feed the hungry, house the homeless, comfort the sick, cold, or isolated. However, “The language of rights tends to seek to establish a hegemony over our moral

\textsuperscript{118} ibid p. 299  
\textsuperscript{119} HP p. 61  
\textsuperscript{120} FLN p. 346  
\textsuperscript{121} HP p. 60  
\textsuperscript{122} Andrew p. 69
thinking.”123 By granting primacy and authority to rights over morals, society creates a possibility where what is evil can overcome what is good: “For the possession of a right implies making either good or bad use of it.”124 Rights-based doctrines have no inherent moral core for doing good over evil. We may have the “right” not to give to the poor, but should a beggar perish from starvation, we are guilty of failing to meet an obligation to alleviate suffering. For Weil, denying any basic necessity to people in need, is an example of injustice; we instead have an obligation to respond to suffering. Yet granting hegemony to rights, and the rights of others, is primarily a liberal society’s “morality,” no matter what the fate of its marginalized citizens:

“If you say to someone who has ears to hear: ‘What you are doing to me is not just,’ you may touch and awaken at its source the spirit of attention and love. . . To place the notion of rights at the centre of social conflicts is to inhibit any possible impulse of charity on both sides.”125

Rights-talk simplifies and dismisses injustice.126 Rights have no connection with doing what is good.

Despite these critiques on rights, Weil does not advocate an illiberal (unfree) society. She holds individual freedom in high regard; it is one of the highest needs of the soul: “Complete, unlimited freedom of expression for every sort of opinion, without the least restriction or reserve, is an absolute need on the part of intelligence.”127 What Weil does not adhere to is how the foundation of political freedom lies within the realm of human rights. The inherent injustice that results from prioritizing rights becomes a driving influence behind Weil’s switch to an obligation-based political philosophy. By focussing on personal rights, an individual will lack empathy towards the affliction of others. For Weil, a politically free, just, and equitable, society should be grounded by the needs of the soul for every individual. Freedom should not be foisted

123 Hamilton p. 197
124 NR p. 275
125 HP p. 63
126 Andrew p. 75
127 NR p. 22, Weil’s “Needs of the Soul” is a topic of Chapter 3.
upon citizens by way of rights. Society should prioritize human needs and meet the obligation it has for those needs. Only through obligation can justice be attained.

Justice

By Weil’s assessment, rights do not produce or ground morality in theory or praxis, are fragmentary, do not carry legitimate authoritative influence, are subject to give-and-take, and wrongly take precedence over justice. To explain justice, Weil sets up a hypothetical example of an accused and illiterate “vagrant as he stands before the magistrate.” He is unable to voice his case, rights, or affliction: “His cry is mute.” Weil asserts how the primary use of rights, and by his lack of property or status, override this particular cause for justice regardless of guilt or innocence. The vagrant is silenced by a judiciary immersed in personhood, possession, and property. Understanding Weil’s concept of justice is much more than just her critique of rights. As seen above, Weil asserts rights cannot uphold what is intended, namely a society in which all are equally respected, including the criminal. Justice, on the other hand, has an importance over rights. It has a special meaning and Weil feared justice may be lost in a hegemonic discourse over rights:

“When words lose their meaning, the consequences may be morally harmful to individuals and to society. Justice she believed, is one such word that has lost its meaning in modern times, becoming a vacuous, meaningless term, replaced by the empty notion of ‘rights’: rights for the individual and rights for the collectivity.”

Weil argued for a renewal of justice in her alternative political philosophy. This section will focus on that theoretical framework.

Definitions of justice are dependent on presupposed systems of belief regarding social conduct and participation:

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128 HP p. 71
129 HP p. 71
130 Willox p. 59
Issues of justice arise in circumstances in which people can advance claims – to freedom, opportunities, resources, and so forth – that are potentially conflicting, and we appeal to justice to resolve such conflicts by determining what each person is properly entitled to have. In contrast, where people’s interests converge, and the decision to be taken is about the best way to pursue some common purpose.”

Justice may be broadly defined as this process of bringing forth equality of claims at such time or place when equality does not exist. Justice’s primary purpose includes an end design of fairness, respect and compassion for others. Arguably, a rights-based understanding of justice can appeal to fairness and equitability just as one obligation-based one. Yet, by acknowledging that inequality exists, as does the existence of personal and social oppression, “justice makes us attend not just to those who speak, but also to the voiceless, the afflicted, and the obscure.”

Rights claimants contest power, yet attending to the afflicted has been Weil’s calling. However, common practice in American society attempts to carry out justice by way of retribution or compensation; these are held to be means to attaining justice, and accepted as justice itself. For Weil, retribution and compensation are not the defining features of social justice, particularly when marginalized or afflicted individuals are involved. Seeking these can lead to abuse and illusion, as these are means for satisfying the “person” of a plaintiff. As discussed above, Weil attributes the impersonal as the source of the sanctity of the human being; this sacred source of ourselves is universal and is a primary attribute for justice, Her critique of personalism additionally accentuates what she held as the sanctity of each individual. Giving attention to others also serves as a basis for justice because creating equality begins with the love and respect we should have for what is sacred within each human being.

Building from this grounding, the attributes of justice illustrate how the impersonal is not to be confused with detachment or disinterestedness:

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132 Hammer p. 94
“Impersonal is certainly not synonymous with uncaring. Impersonal justice, that articulated by means of unconditional obligations, is more closely allied to love and care than a conception of justice expressed by means of personal rights.”

Justice is inherently committed to the social well-being of all. Therefore, justice is not solely subject to personal claims. Justice must be pursued outside of personal circumstance, property ownership or social status:

“In contrast to the proverbial wisdom that the squeaky wheel gets the oil, Weil’s notion of justice is impersonal in that the principle . . . does not depend on the audibility of the clamor or the ability of victims of injustice to voice their claims or articulate their rights, and the basis [likewise] does not depend on the ability or inability of the accused to hire a good lawyer.”

While these attributes serve well in theory, can it be leveled at Weil that her conception of the impersonal is too idealistic to be applied to interpersonal situations? Is there a praxis to impersonal justice?

Weil’s answer to that question may be found in her essay critiquing the Allied effort during World War II: “Are We Struggling for Justice.” In it, there are in fact only scant mentions of the war itself, the Nazis, or the liberation of France. “Are We Struggling for Justice” is an essay about applying justice in all political relations. Justice’s key element is consent. The sacred in us, and the recognition of the sacred of others, is grounding for her investigation of justice in society and this recognition incorporates an implicit love for our neighbor and empathy for the oppressed. In other words, through the affliction of others and the need to give attention to others: “Men made with love for their fellows suffer under the thought that everywhere in the world human beings serve as intermediaries to the will of others without having consented to it.” Consent contains an element of submission to power, but not submission based on societal...
or legal authority, or exchange: “Consent is neither to be bought nor sold.”\textsuperscript{136} Consent has to be an informed permission, granted with full knowledge of the risks, consequences, and/or benefits. Likewise, those in power ideally consent to recognize the needs of their fellow human beings; they act upon a social agreement to meet these needs, albeit through leadership. Therefore, an act of justice is not blind submission, it contains a sacred accord towards each other: “Justice has as its object the exercise of the faculty of consent on earth. To preserve it religiously wherever it exists, to try to create conditions for it where it is absent, that is to live justice.”\textsuperscript{137} So Weil applies consent critically not only to the Allied effort, but also in the case of the destitute man on the street:

“If one is hungry one eats, not for the love of God but because one is hungry. If an unknown man lying in the road is hungry one must give him food, even if one has not enough for oneself, not for the love of God, but because he is hungry. That is what it is to love one’s neighbor as oneself.”\textsuperscript{138}

Justice is the unconditional love of, and consent to obligations for, others. In Weil's philosophy, this is particularly accentuated by her concept of affliction. Thereupon, even as France was a partner in the Allied effort (an effort she supported), Weil notwithstanding applied justice to its colonial empire, “Where the influence of the white race has penetrated.”\textsuperscript{139} Weil was a fearless, consistent and adamant critic of French colonialism and not just in this essay. Through French colonization, Weil asserted there was no consent by, or for the, colonized subjects “[they] were being held down by force” (afflicted). Therefore, Weil was “unable . . . to think that France’s [overall] cause was just.”\textsuperscript{140} Fighting for justice is an ongoing and difficult struggle; for who is to determine right from wrong when “the other side” believes it is in the right. Regardless, her
grounding is consent towards and for the sacred in all and the struggle for justice begins with that admission.

Weil was a supporter of the rule of law, yet she held justice to be above the a practical application of law when it did not seek a recognition of and an end to suffering: “Justice consists in seeing that no harm is done to men. Whenever a man cries inwardly: ‘Why am I being hurt?’ harm is being done to him.”141 At least ideally, justice is the alleviation of affliction. Justice includes all people in all circumstances: “To maintain justice and preserve men from all harm means first of all to prevent harm being done to them.”142 Acts of justice recognize foremost the needs of others and the inherent obligation to meet and fulfill those needs: “The obligation to provide for the basic needs of humanity constitutes the foundation of Weil’s notion of justice.”143 Therefore, laws should be written and enforced based on a recognition of the sacred and impersonal in all, therefore should focus on reducing suffering, and meet the needs of citizens. As is discussed at length in chapter three, Weil sought and labored for a new understanding of how society should be formulated:

“Above those institutions which are concerned with protecting rights and persons and democratic freedoms, others must be invented for the purpose of exposing and abolishing everything in contemporary life which buries the soul under injustice, lies, and ugliness. They must be invented, for they are unknown, and it is impossible to doubt that they are indispensable.”144

As critic and visionary, Weil’s political philosophy is her undertaking to achieve her vision of a new society, instituting consent-based justice, one that raises the individual above the squalor and meanness of the modern world, whose laws recognized a genuine equality for all its citizens.

141 HP p. 73
142 HP p. 74
143 Andrew p. 72
144 HP p. 78
CHAPTER IV
TOWARDS A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF OBLIGATION

This thesis has examined elements of Simone Weil’s spirituality, including how her understanding of the human experience through affliction and attention. Her spiritual dimension of affliction has a secular side which she applies to her political philosophy. With attention, Weil bases her approach on love and consent among individuals, between peoples. Both affliction and attention involve an emptying of the ego and selfish aspirations in order to seek a pure interaction with God and between each. This thesis has also explored Weil’s critique of rights and her alternative position of impersonal justice. Weil has a universalist approach to justice based on the intrinsic value of a human being that transcends rights-based political philosophy. Weil consistently voiced objections to rights as they are claims of the person (or parties), possessions rather than sacred aspects of ourselves. How these elements of her spirituality connect into her approach towards a political philosophy is the topic of this section. A political philosophy cannot base itself solely on critique and discontent. Knowing that, Weil’s distrust of political parties is indeed curtailed by a recognition that political doctrines are still necessary: “A doctrine is not sufficient, but it is indispensable to have one.”145 Society still needs a political dimension. She likens a political doctrine to the “polar star,” serving as a guide; a doctrine offers a sense of direction which retains justice as its end goal. Weil wrote such a blueprint for a French doctrine of governance in her works, The Need for Roots and, “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligation”146 Given how Weil eschewed party politics and her disdain for the rights-based, constitution drafts circulating within the Committee, this chapter explores where her work would

145 DSHO p. 131
146 Pétrement p. 492
otherwise lead. What follows is an analysis of the main themes of *Roots* and the “Draft” in order to explore their political implications.

**The Needs of the Soul**

*The Need for Roots* may be Simone Weil’s best known work and it is the one book she put together herself. *Roots* is more a social than spiritual treatise, but the impact of the latter is unmistakable: “[*Roots*’] proposals seem to have more the character of inspiration or spiritual direction than systematic law.”

*Roots* directly touches on what Weil thought was a cult of materialism within Western society which she holds as a primary cause of social inequality and unrest within the specific context of France. All through *Roots*, when Weil refers to “soul” and “human,” she addresses what she holds as sacred in and meaningful for each of us, what roots us. Society has to be morally oriented towards fulfilling obligation and rooted in a spiritual culture. From these basic themes, Weil sets out to outline a reinvigoration of society through a fresh understanding of its spiritual roots. In *Roots* she expanded on her ideas that a meaningful life through one’s personal, cultural connection (rootedness) contains both social history and, to some degree, an expectation of the future.

France’s cultural development and history are important to her theme and Weil gives them a lengthy overview. She disparages the centuries old emergence of shallow patriotism and national pride as being a travesty of France’s true roots. She argues how by losing its roots, France easily fell to the Nazi war machine, in fact, the country was primed for it. *Roots* can be read as Weil voicing her frustration over the defeat, yet she makes several proposals for correction with the post-war period in mind. An application of some of her ideas may be subject to critique. For example, who determines the criteria for one citizen to become a laborer and another a minister? Home ownership is also questionable in Weil’s proposals. It is not clear...

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147 Andrew p. 75
whether owning a house is private or communal or whether there should be such a thing as
generational inheritance. Yet what she is attempting is a blue print for how society could be
equitable and responsive to the particular needs for each individual.

_ Roots_ opens with “The Needs of the Soul,” both an introduction to its core theme and a
stand alone essay. In this essay, Weil again asserts the primacy of human needs and society’s
obligations over personal rights: “The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is
subordinate and relative to the former. A right is not effectual by itself, but only in relation to the
obligation to which it corresponds.”148 In some respect, a “need for the soul” transcends our
bodily requirements for survival while at the same time acknowledging them. Weil asserts that
both types of needs are equally essential to living fully and a cental piece to making society
good:

“We must distinguish between what is fundamental and what is fortuitous. Man requires,
not rice or potatoes, but food, not wood or coal, but heating. . . . For the needs of the soul,
we must recognize the different, but equivalent, sorts of satisfaction which cater for the
same requirements.”149

The needs of the soul are emotional and spiritual. They are intimately connected with basic
material subsistence, yet are aspects of living contented and fulfilled. For Weil it is not just
owning a “house,” but having a home, a place where one’s individual search for truth can take
root. Simply put, the soul needs a home. The highest level of the life of the soul is where “the
love of God and the love of one’s neighbor are one love.”150 Heinfetz writes,

“For Weil, it seems as though the ability to show compassion is intimately linked . . .
with the acceptance of something which is more like a philosophical truth about the
world in general, and with an underlying attitude towards it, a way of being oriented.”151

148 NR p. 3
149 NR p. 9-10
150 FLN p. 179
151 Jesson p. 194
That orientation is towards compassion. It is the main theme for all Weil’s political work. The recognition of human needs supersedes personal rights and selfish wants when it comes to our inclinations and behaviors in society.

Weil’s needs are a set of measured ideas for society to prioritize. The needs are underscored by Weil’s faith that to meet the needs of justice and our obligations to each other, some guiding structure has to be in place in order for a society to provide the material and social conditions to nurture a fulfilling life and minimize conflicts between individuals: “For the soul has needs whose non-satisfaction leaves it in [an afflicted] state.”152 She is not arguing for or against a set of laws per se, but instead for a structure of society to consent to do good. Therefore, social obligation is implied with the recognition of the needs.

Weil counts thirteen needs of the soul and most of “Needs” is a sectional breakdown of them. There is some commonality and overlap between them, but each does have a characteristic all its own. The needs Weil lists are: order, liberty, responsibility, equality, hierarchism, honor, punishment, freedom of opinion, security, risk, private property, collective property, and truth.153

“Order,” Weil’s first listed need, goes with security. Essentially it’s Weil’s way of indicating the importance of freedom from fear of disorder. Order is followed by liberty, obedience and responsibility. These are individual needs, yet form the basis for a sense of security to function within society. Weil does recognize that the individual must be free to make choices, and also meet the need for freedom of opinion, but with the understanding that society has to be ordered and secure. Therefore, certain cautions about knowing and acting upon truth come into play. Truth itself is a need and the most important for society. Truth is specifically tailored for the citizen to make informed, freely offered and responsible choices. Weil

152 DSHO p. 138
153 NR p. 10-36
specifically targets propaganda (the stuff of political parties) as societal falsehood and argues it should be banned. Responsibility as a need is intended to allow one, “to feel one is useful and even indispensable.” Yet this need will be compromised by false and misleading information. Responsibility blends with an agreed upon obedience to social norms. There has to be a level of equality in place. Equality involves respect: “It consists in a recognition . . . that the same amount of respect and consideration is due to every human being . . . and is not a matter of degree.” Where there are instances of social mobility, the opportunities should be equal; the “son of a farmer” should be invited and encouraged to become the prime minister just as equally as the son of the prime minister.

However, Weil identifies social hierarchism as a need. Devotion towards superiors, people in power, not so much as separate individuals, but as symbols of leadership grounds the need for hierarchism. This is tricky ground for Weil and her assertion for equality. Is the existence of inequality fixed for -human society? As we have seen, inequality is something intolerable when it is the cause of affliction. Yet by placing hierarchism in her list of needs, Weil seeks to differentiate what is common and distinct within society. This she does in order to encourage a civic belief in a common good. Weil's challenge of hierarchism and politics may be one of persuading those in power themselves as part of a whole. Individuals may sometimes be required to perform unequal tasks, but the effort is geared to benefit the whole. Acknowledging differences promotes a deeper unity.

Honor represents a social pat-on-the-back that stimulates a citizen’s moral conduct. Hierarchism and honor both meet a need for following a moral code, yet honor more closely connects with the traditions of society, a “noble tradition” that can be recognized by all. By

154 NR p. 15
155 NR p. 16
losing one’s honor, the need of the soul is punishment. Punishment comes in two forms: disciplinary and punitive. The former is a reinforcement, like coaching, for what is expected of an individual. However, punitive punishment Weil holds as the more important type. Punitive punishment is compelled by actual crime: “By committing crime, a man places himself . . . outside the chain of eternal obligations.” Punishment intends to “weld him back” into society. The severity of the punishment must not only respect the honor of the perpetrator, but accede to the social obligation that was violated. Risk as a need is Weil’s way of addressing social stagnation and boredom. Through risk, for the good of society, the individual confronts fears and learns to overcome them.

Weil’s final needs are about both communal and private property. Weil recognizes how an individual sense of belonging incorporates ownership, “to be surrounded by objects which seem . . . like an extension of the [self].” People should be able to own their own homes and tools for living, yet society also has communal property where a shared ownership is respected. Weil’s point is how communal property initiates positive social rootedness. Each of Roots’ proposals intends to meet these needs of the soul outlined, but also to “grow roots.” This too has a spiritual element in that what afflicts society is uprootedness. Growing roots within a society is an essential part for which the people may give attention towards the good for all. On the whole, the work is geared towards French society. While it contains broad strokes, it lacks some connection (through its historical review) to non-French societies. As an inclusive political philosophy, Weil wrote the “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligation.” The essential needs of the human soul, including positive ones like equality and freedom of opinion, as well as paradoxical ones like risk and punishment, come together in shaping social obligations.

156 NR p. 20-21
157 NR p. 34
Draft for a Statement of Human Obligation

As ambitious a project as *Roots* was (considering Weil’s few months in London), by comparison the essay “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations,” is a brief outline. The “Draft” is a road map streamlining Weil’s discourse into a more methodological set of propositions. It is an abstraction for how a populace should dutifully govern itself, prioritizing a “political life [with] concepts of justice and obligation.”158 By giving hegemony to obligation over rights, Weil seeks to redefine justice around universal equality and harmony rather than as a balancing acts of power or possessions.

As rights do not serve to formulate to basis of society, a possible question, specifically for Weil, is: “Can Christianity serve as a foundation for society?” In *Roots* she not only disparages the loss of the spiritual roots, but specifically Christian roots. Still, Christianity was not her approach to an alternative, liberal society: “If Weil’s argument hinges on accepting her understanding of God, then her philosophic approach [would] not be necessarily persuasive to our political age.”159 Hammer’s point applies to both Western Europe in 1943 and for us today. In the “Draft,” Weil makes her strongest stance regarding the existence of a transcendent and universal moral law, yet Weil did not write a Christian doctrine into her political philosophy. She set out upon the project incorporating many themes with a universal appeal, despite her Christian leanings. She argues for a transcendent moral good for all people, making her case by avoiding any antinomian spirituality, with no direct reference to Heaven or Hell, sin or salvation. As we have already seen, her philosophy is grounded on her own spiritual account of attention and affliction. Following her ontological foundation of the “good,” with all its spiritual aspects, Weil gives an account for the individual and society within the *world*.

158 Pétrement p. 500
159 Hammer p. 95
Weil’s “Draft” provides the expression of her vision in a final copy, one which Weil hoped would be approachable and acceptable to the secular population. The “Draft” elaborates her ideas of the sacredness of individual human beings and the level of responsibility we have towards each other, and begins with a metaphysical set of propositions: “There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties.”

Weil postulates an unobservable reality, yet a postulation of existence: “Corresponding to this reality, at the centre of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world.” Despite only really knowing the facticity of the world (affliction), simultaneously within us is the yearning for good. Again, Weil is not interested in intellectual puzzles or arguments for the existence of a spiritual plane (God). Therefore, a paradox or contradiction is the starting point in the “Draft.” To be sure, since an existence of a spiritual plane cannot in fact be established by cool reasoning, Weil still argued that a belief in the “good” can bring about fulfillment. We are stuck, but we can also find the good in universal norms, in the transcendent: “If our attention is entirely confined to this world it is entirely subject to the effect of [earthly] inequalities, which it is all the less able to resist because it is unaware of it.”

To be truly human, requires an attentive connection with the transcendent reality, inaccessible as it seems. Here, Weil shows her faith in the virtuousness, nobility of soul and the justness of humanity.

Man’s connection to earth is shaped by necessity, what Weil also calls force or gravity, and affliction. In the “Draft” Weil reaffirms the needs of the soul, yet doesn’t fail to prioritize man’s needs of the body. These needs, body and soul, form the basis of obligation: “Each need is

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160 DSHO p. 132
161 DSHO p. 132
162 DSHO p. 134
related to an obligation, and each obligation to a need.” An obligation is not based upon any de facto situation, nor upon jurisprudence, customs, social structure, relative state of forces, historical heritage, or presumed historical orientation; for no de facto situation is able to create an obligation. An obligation is eternal, non-contingent to the vicissitudes of life on earth, and only by paying true attention to the affliction of others, does the obligation for each other become manifest. The “Draft” reviews obligations as they relate to the needs of human body and soul as corresponding sets. Balance is the goal. One speaks to the requirements of survival, the other the fulfillment of living. Though the “Draft” remunerates the needs of the soul, it is the addition of the bodily needs that make the essay a fuller statement towards all humankind: “The principal needs of the body are food, warmth, sleep, health, rest, exercise, fresh air.” Weil asserts that all needs also are rooted in man’s natural world and meeting the needs forms the basis for morality:

“The needs of a human being are sacred. Their satisfaction cannot be subordinated either to reasons of state, or to any consideration of money, nationality, race, or color, or to the moral or other value attributed to the human being in question, or to any consideration whatsoever.”

Failing to meet needs is thereby immoral and an injustice. No where else does Weil so passionately convey the importance of attention than she does in the “Draft”:

“Anyone whose attention and love are really directed towards the reality outside the world recognizes at the same time that he is bound, both in public and private life, by the single and permanent obligation to remedy, according to his responsibilities and to the extent of his power, all the privations of soul and body which are liable to destroy or damage the earthly life of any human being whatsoever.”

163 DSHO p. 138
164 NR p. 5
165 DSHO p. 138-139
166 DSHO p. 138
167 DSHO p. 136
Weil included in good governance the mandate for meeting needs and fulfilling obligations; if any individual, by willful action, refuses to recognize human obligations they are guilty of an injustice. Each individual can direct himself towards the good, but can also be robbed of the good by individuals in power who may seek to destroy what is sacred for strictly personal gain. As earthly life is dictated by necessity, the human choices made on earth, and the morality exhibited by these choices, are key issues for Weil. In reforming the social contract away from rights, Weil argues that the obligation to respect the human needs of both body and soul is central. In most, if not all, situations, individuals do have the choice to respect needs or to ignore them. But ignoring needs leads to affliction. Individual attention for human needs allows us to consent to justice and the good for others; respect for human needs is evidence of love of neighbor, an implicit form of the love of God.

For Simone Weil, the obligation grounded her political philosophy. Her key themes are found in *The Need for Roots* and “The Draft of a Statement of Human Obligations.” These are her doctrines. Weil asserts that obligations are better leveraged to meet the demands of modern society:

> “An obligation which goes unrecognized by anybody loses none of the full force of its existence. A right which goes unrecognized by anybody is not worth very much. It makes nonsense to say that men have, on the one hand, rights, and on the other hand, obligations.”  

Obligations are conceptualized as impersonal both through her rejection of personalism and in her critique of rights. Weil makes a clear distinction between recognizing the sacred in human beings and the façade of the person. She acknowledges the specific characteristics of any given person and their individual situation, but grounds obligation in the sacredness of all humans:

> “It is impossible to feel equal respect for things that are in fact unequal unless the respect is given to something that is identical in all of them. . . . All human beings are absolutely

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168 NR p. 3
identical in so far as they can be thought of as consisting of a centre, which is an unquenchable desire for good, surrounded by an accretion of psychical and bodily matter."\(^{169}\)

Meeting obligations and fulfilling human needs are acts of justice as Weil presented the concept; these are acts of consent. A society can be considered by its merited fulfillment of its citizens needs: “The proportions of good and evil in any society depend partly upon the proportion of consent to that of refusal and partly upon the distribution of power between those who consent and those who refuse.”\(^{170}\) A just society consents to the obligations its members have towards each other. Andrew further observes,

“The contingency of personal rights upon existence also grounds her assertion that an unrecognized obligation 'loses none of the full force of its existence' unless one asserts that death [of an individual] from inattention is not a matter of injustice. From Weil’s point of view, such a death is a dramatic injustice but one which cannot lucidly be expressed in the language of rights, conceived as personal protections.”\(^{171}\)

Injustice cannot be elucidated in a language of rights, but it will linger if it is not addressed, if the need behind it is not fulfilled. Weil chafes a political system that does not adhere primarily to obligations or, at least gives them equal attention. Attention is that self-less act of giving primacy to others:

“There is no legitimate limit to the satisfaction of the needs of a human being except as imposed by necessity and by the needs of other human beings. The limit is only legitimate if the needs of all human beings receive an equal degree of attention.”\(^{172}\)

It is society’s role to ease the suffering of all its participants: “We must eliminate affliction as much as we can from social life”\(^{173}\) All the major themes of Weil’s culminate in her obligation-based, political philosophy. Attention towards the affliction of others leads to a recognition of needs and obligations: “The one possibility of indirect expression of respect for the human being

\(^{169}\) DSHO p. 134-135  
\(^{170}\) DSHO p. 136-137  
\(^{171}\) Andrew p. 74  
\(^{172}\) DSHO p. 138  
\(^{173}\) GG p. 158
is offered by men’s needs, the needs of the soul and of the body, in this world.”

Justice is attained when we consent to alleviate affliction. Weil is aiming for a doctrine imbued with a recognition of that sacred something, the soul, in all of us and how that recognition should be applied. Steven Burns wrote,

“I have explained Weil’s criticism of our emphasis on the personality and on personal rights, and I have presented her positive account of the impersonal: the longing for good, the cry of affliction, and the possibility of attention. The individuals whom we cherish are not lost in Weil’s impersonality. The impersonal is the sacred in us; it is what makes us capable of love.”

Through her philosophy, we can appraise our current situation, how we view and interact with each other coupled with the consequences of its rights-based politics and how the distribution of goods and services is applied. We can rethink how a society can be structured. We can begin the process of easing the affliction of our lives.

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174 DSHO p. 135
CHAPTER V

THE POST WAR FRENCH CONSTITUTION AND CONCLUSION

Pushing her political philosophy from theory into a useful doctrine was one of Simone Weil’s objectives as a member of de Gaulle’s delegation. Despite the fact she was not staying on track with what the Committee expected of her, she did want to contribute, in a positive way, to the defeat of Nazi Germany and the reconstruction of France. She might not have known it, but by some accounts, she was being read and making an impact.

What Weil’s immediate impact may have been is impossible to gauge. For example, in her final chapter on Weil, Simone Pétrement made a profound claim: “It should be noted that in the new Declaration that was published in the press of the Free French movement on August 4, 1943, there is not only a list of rights but also a list of duties. Perhaps they had to some extent taken Simone’s ideas into account.” Pétrement was referring to the “Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights,” conceived and created within Charles de Gaulle’s Reform Committee. Pétrement implies that with addition of duties, rights are counter-balanced by notions of obligations inferred by duties. However, the Declaration itself does not lend itself to Weil’s ideas directly, none of it has a distinctly Weilian imprint. Even acknowledging the “changes which have since taken place in the human condition,” the “Declaration” still boasts of, “taking up the thought of the French revolutionaries of 1789 and 1793.” Rights outnumber duties thirty-four to twelve, showing the emphasis the Committee. The duties also read as rights-in-reverse and as personal possessions as Weil describes: “Every man must respect human dignity, in him, in the person of his fellowman . . . Every man must respect the rights of other citizens . . . To revolt is

\[\text{176} \text{ Pétrement p. 500 iiiiiii expand on context from Andrew p. 74 (unquoted)}\]


\[\text{178 Michel p. 283}\]
the most sacred of rights and the most imperious of duties.”179 Ironically perhaps, the “Declaration” itself was only a draft. In the following years, the French quickly had two referendums on its constitution, both were rewrites different in content from the 1943 draft. Despite Pétremont’s hagiographic appraisal of Weil, it may be that her political philosophy is too idealistic to apply, too much theory and not enough practicality. Can it be that the historical time period of Simone Weil may also be too constricting considering its conflict and confusion? I argue against both questions. Weil offered a different view, but not an impossible one, one that can be applied in any social context.

Simone Weil’s philosophy is grounded by elements of both the spiritual and secular. From this grounding, her political philosophy especially emphasized her strong beliefs about the relationships between individuals and groups. She had an intensely personal spiritual drive and down to earth social commitments. Weil’s intersection of thought developed in her devotion towards the timeless needs of all humanity. She is universalist and broad minded as well. Among her many areas of interest, Weil had a great deal of respect for science, both as a learning process and as a body of knowledge. Her last entry into her notebooks reads, “The most important part of teaching = to teach what it is to know (in the scientific sense). Nurses.”180 I have no doubt she would fully embrace the scientific concept that we are all one biological family (citizens of the planet), based on the evidence of the DNA molecule. Hand-in-hand with that, I have no doubt she would also recognize humanity as one spiritual family, the children of God.

In twenty-first century America, where our society is increasingly becoming a heterogeneous composite of different ethnicities, religions and political viewpoints, can our liberal society create a uniting spirit that can hold together its fragmented constituents? It is

179 Michel p. 286-287
180 FLN p. 364 italics in text
historically demonstrable that a social collective is much stronger than one person. Yet as Weil would admit, every collectivity depends its existence upon the creation and workings of individuals. Indeed, an actual debate about a down-to-earth, legal system of enforcing the fulfillment of obligations, concretely producing an alternative, constitutional government, is difficult to conceive in our society at large. However, it wasn’t all that long ago that the democratic ideal of all society’s members have a say in forming its society, was also debated under what was thought to be the impregnable Divine Rulership of Kings. The value of the ideals of “freedom” or “liberty” cannot be taken for granted in these turbulent times. Change may only begin with a conversation between a few individuals. In my thesis, I have repeatedly discussed Simone Weil's critique of rights as an important element of her philosophy. Within rights are ideals of civility and respect for our fellow citizens. Only a few generations ago these ideals were enacted into the American Bill of Rights, the formative guidelines for the political life of the citizens of the United States. Yet for Weil, the primary source for good governance must include a spiritual obligation we have with each other. I submit that an enactment of a political philosophy can be done on the ideals of an obligation-based political philosophy. The resulting society will most likely not be a utopia as the term is popularly understood, but it will have a different grounding, a transformed praxis for how its citizens view and interact with each other. This hypothetical may not be so wild an idea as, say, Weil’s front line nurses. Yet if by postponing its adoption we are, at best skeptical, or at worst fearful, of its results, then, somehow, we seem to think that we are already living in the most equitable and just society man can create.
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