

Responding to Simone Weil

Reading Simone Weil is like being exposed to a tornado, being hit on the head and drinking a clear glass of water all at once. I first read the book which this essay came from when I was in Paris, where I had discovered her, before I even thought of doing a PhD and even before I started my Masters on migrants in Calais: perhaps it even inspired it, I don't remember. However, I do remember when reading this that Weil's figure of the 'malheureux' (the afflicted) exists today, and perhaps in the figure of the refugee. Later, when I came across Agamben's work on the 'bare life' figure and the state of exception, I was struck by the similarities to Weil's ideas of the person struck by affliction. Then I found out that Agamben did his PhD thesis on the political thought of Simone Weil, which made sense even though he has never referred to her work in his writings as far as I have seen.

Her writings covered history, politics, philosophy, science, classics, mythology, religion; she was also proficient in Greek, Latin and Sanskrit thanks to a prodigious upbringing and education as well as an insatiable thirst for learning. But first, some background information on Simone Weil (1909- 1943) as I think it sheds light on much of her writing and where she was coming from. In her short life (death at aged 34), she was a philosopher, teacher, labour activist, factory worker, farm worker and briefly, a soldier. Born in an agnostic Jewish bourgeois family in Paris, she went to the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (ENS) along with the other famous Simone of that time, Simone de Beauvoir. In her autobiography, Simone de Beauvoir recounts her first- and last- conversation with Simone Weil:

She intrigued me because of her great reputation for intelligence and her bizarre outfits...I don't know how the conversation got started. She said in piercing tones that only one thing mattered these days: the revolution that would feed all the starving people on the earth. I retorted, no less adamantly, that the problem was not to make men happy, but to help them find a meaning in their existence. She glared at me and said, 'It's clear you've never gone hungry.' Our relations ended right there.

After finishing at ENS she taught philosophy at a couple of girl's schools, was active in trade unions at this time and on weekends taught classes in French and political economy to workers at the trade union headquarters. Then at age 25 she took a year off to work in a number of factories, including the Renault car factory and Alstom Electrical Works in order to get direct experience of the working conditions for workers in France. She saw with growing concern the rapid industrialization of factories in France as being a place for workers' oppression and exploitation.

Weil's point of departure in her decision to become a factory worker was her desire to experience for herself the conditions of the workers. Despite her active involvement with trade unions and political groups, she felt that only through directly experiencing the conditions as a worker herself, could she understand and thereby propose solutions to improve workers' conditions:

Only, when I think about the major Bolshevik leaders pretending to create a free working class and yet none of them- definitely not Trotsky, and neither I think, Lenin - without a doubt have not stepped foot into a factory and therefore have the least idea of the real

conditions which determine the servitude or freedom of the workers- politics seems to me like a sinister farce.

In a letter to one of her former students she stated that it was a 'contact with real life' she was searching for. In joining the factories as one of the workers, she wrote that, "I have the feeling, above all, of escaping a world of abstractions and finding myself in the middle of real people- good or bad, but with a real goodness or badness". As one biographer of Simone Weil put it, "Her whole effort was that of a student, in the old root sense of that word: she had an insatiable, unyielding zeal for testing, for finding out".

Indeed, her time at the factory gave her much to reflect on, coming up with several concrete proposals to what she saw as the essential problem of factory work as it was currently organized: that it was a condition of slavery which ultimately destroyed the workers' soul. Her time in the factory marked her forever, indelibly, as a 'slave'. In letters to friends, she recounts the difficulty of factory life, "I still know how to feel joy, but there is a certain lightness of heart that seems to me now, forever impossible". Reading her factory diaries and articles that came out of that experience, I am struck by how relevant it still is to contemporary factory work and labour; this time no longer in France but perhaps in China, India, or in the cocoa fields in Africa, or child labour in developing countries.

Her reflections from her period of factory work also helped to feed into theories she later developed on liberty and oppression, and her wider thoughts on the spiritual and religious meaning of work: in a startling piece she writes about the mysticism of work and of manual labour being a sacrament; this came directly out of her factory experience. I find her methodology of 'direct contact', and her emphasis on empirical data resonates not only with my own beliefs about producing knowledge, but also with the anthropological approach of ethnography. Perhaps she was an ethnographer without realising that she was one.

In 1936 she joined the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, joining the anarchist militia. However she only stayed a few months due to her clumsiness, where she burnt herself over a cooking fire. It was enough though for her to witness the brutalities committed on both sides, and to produce writings on the nature of war as well as the conditions for peace. In some of her letters to friends she described how war 'revealed the presence of death in every moment', and how she felt within herself a capacity to kill.

After leaving the war, she went to work for a few months on a potato farm and vineyard. She also took trips to Italy and Portugal, where she was to have a couple of mystical experiences. Despite these mystical experiences which led her to fervently believe that she was Catholic, she refused to be baptised in the Church with reasons that she gave in her letter to a priest, published in her posthumous book of essays, *Waiting for God*. In 1942, she was able to escape to the United States with her family as the Germans occupied Paris (her family was able to take the last train out of Paris to the South, Marseille). After a few months she left the U.S. to go back to Europe; not being able to stand the thought of deserting her country to its fate, she wanted to go back and help. We can only imagine the anguish her parents must have felt as they said goodbye to their daughter, as well as the courageous folly of this young Jewish woman voluntarily returning to Europe during the war to join the Free French Alliance in London. It was to be the last time her parents would see her.

In London, she volunteered herself to be sent to any mission back to France, of course got told that her obvious Jewish appearance made it impossible and instead got assigned a desk job. She was told to write what French society would look like after the war, to aid the reconstruction of French society- the outcome for this was *The Need for Roots*. In 1943, while still in London she was diagnosed with tuberculosis, but apparently reduced her food intake to what she believed residents of German-

occupied France ate. She finally died from cardiac failure that year at age 34, with the coroner's report saying that "the deceased did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed."

Simone Weil suffered from debilitating migraines that had no known cause all her life- she described this pain as being everyday 'without stop'. Friends talked about how she would have to stop in mid-conversation due to a migraine coming on, and also how she ate very little throughout her life, with scholars suggesting that she had suffered from anorexia. Her frailties were exacerbated by her time at the factory, an experience that she never quite physically recovered from. No doubt all of these experiences of pain as well as witnessing the pain of others informed her own writing on suffering, in particular her essay on *The Love of God and Affliction*.

In her essay, Weil looks at the nature of a kind of suffering which she takes to be different from what we usually mean by suffering. To paraphrase, there is a level of suffering possible in the world that completely annihilates the self, that affects on all levels of the person- the physical, mental and social- what she calls 'affliction' (*malheureux*). If you suffer and can still say 'why me?' then you're not at that level, because you still believe you deserve answers, that you deserve justice, and that you are entitled not to suffer. A broken heart, cancer, car accident- all can be painfully suffered through but without ultimately questioning the belief that, 'I don't deserve this', or 'I should not be suffering': something that we in the privileged West particularly believe. The person that affliction strikes no longer has this belief.

She likens the afflicted to the equivalent of the slave in Roman times. For Weil in her period, the people who reached this abject state were the factory workers and those who had experienced war. As I read Weil's writing about the afflicted, I think of: refugees/displaced persons, modern slavery of exploited labourers, the homeless, prisoners/tortured persons, trafficked humans, the extremely addicted, the institutionalised mentally ill. I think specifically of the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, existing in a legal no-man's land outside the law who could be punished with impunity.

It is to bend and break under a force in the material world that is bigger than you, helpless before it and realising that you are nothing before it- whether it's an economic, political or social force. Economic privilege ensures that a person never has to reach that kind of affliction because not only can money buy a certain amount of physical comfort, but also recognition (as a human being who should not suffer), if not power. In essence, privileged people get to buy themselves out of ever having to experience or even look at that level and kind of suffering.

I also think of the extremely addicted- maybe the situation is even more deplorable and degrading for them because they feel the force that is breaking them as something internal to themselves (as lack of will, self-destructive behaviour) and so it seemingly has less to do with outside forces such as the economic; although I would argue that addictions do have economic, political and social origins, and are a product of an addictive society/culture. Also, the addict with (alot) of money is not the same as the penniless addict. Again, money can buy a level of physical comfort that can make a difference to the overall level of suffering, even if it is to buy oneself a place in a rehabilitation clinic and treatment. Access to this kind of intervention changes the experience of the addiction, and therefore the experience of affliction itself.

Simone Weil believed that the mechanism which doles out affliction is blind necessity. For her, there is no sense of 'providence' as we usually know it, of things meant to happen, of sufferings meant to be suffered. Instead, we are at the mercy of randomness and chance, and experience affliction as necessity.

Yet, although necessity and therefore affliction is predicated on blind chance, it is not meaningless; it does serve a purpose. She posits that in necessity is the absence of God, and in extreme affliction, the total and complete absence of God. She claims that this absence is actually his presence, and goes on to talk about necessity as obedience, and the beauty of obedience- comparing it to the obedience of nature to the law of gravity. I will limit my focus on her exploration of affliction and that which strikes at the afflicted figure: force. For Weil, force is what rules the world. In her beautiful essay, *The Illiad: the poem of Force*, Weil analyses the literary text The Illiad to show how it highlights the effect and pervasiveness of force, in specific circumstances such as in war, but for Weil in all time and circumstances:

The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force, force that is manipulated by men, force that subdues men, and force that makes human flesh shrink...Force is what makes whoever is subjected to it a thing.

Force is at the centre of the Iliad, and force is at the centre of the world here on earth. But for Weil men (sic) are not masters of force (despite believing so); for even the victors will at some time have to come under its constraint, and again it comes down to the blind mechanism of necessity which distributes force (and therefore suffering and affliction) randomly, and down to chance:

Men are not divided into the conquered, with enslaved and supplicants on one side and conquerors and commanders on the other. There is not a single man who must not at some time bend under the constraint of force...Valour contributes less to determine victory than blind destiny.

She gives the example in The Illiad where both Priam and Achilles have their moments of being the conquered and afflicted. She praises The Illiad for showing how force strikes both the Trojans and the Athenians, randomly and without bias. Sometimes they experience this force as the death of a loved one (as in Achilles for Patroclus or Andromache for her husband Hector), as well as their own deaths (Priam pleading for his life from Achilles). According to Weil then, all men are equally susceptible to force, at different times. Blind chance rather than anything we may do is more the determinant of being the conqueror or conquered by force. Is this the nature of being human then- that is, to be at the mercy of force, to live under it, the same way of, "the action of gravity on the fugitive folds of the sea waves, or on the almost eternal folds of the mountains?" (this force being perfectly mirrored in nature).

An element of force is it's affect on the experience of time by people in affliction:

Persons subjected to the arbitrary are suspended in the passage of time; they await- the most demeaning of situations- the vicissitudes of the next instant; they passively submit to the present. They do not dispose of their moments; they do not have a lever to affect the future.

Reading this passage reminds me of the experience of irregular migrants; this point is most applicable to what I saw in Calais. They were a slave to uncertainty, exposed to the constant threat of being arrested as well as time not being their own- their time was not their own because they could not plan anything real in their lives for months, some for years, besides how to get to the next step of their journey- crossing into England. They had to suspend their future, reduce it to a dream of what life would be like once in England, and like Weil says, 'passively submit to the present'. However, they were not completely 'passive' or submitting; if that were so, they would not be there. One thing I learnt from my time in Calais was that it takes agency to be there, making constant decisions and choices to reach Calais, but also to survive there and plan the next step. Agency was also linked to financial means, they could be there because they were able to pay their way to smugglers.

However, listening to people's frustrations and despair as they saw the weeks and months pass by highlighted their experience of a frustrated sense of agency- of not being able to put into action what they planned, or of not being able to see the intended outcomes to the actions they put in place. Everyday was a goalless, futile waiting, the actions they could do were mostly related to survival; whereas their ultimate goal, their main purpose for being there in Calais i.e. get to England did not seem to get any closer; and the longer they were there the more futile it felt. It wasn't any real action that they could take, but rather a waiting on circumstances to change- an opportunity to cross. This left a mutilated sense of agency and will.

Perhaps it is a question of degrees of affliction and degrees of agency. There are people who would fulfil Weil's criteria of affliction (as opposed to merely suffering), yet who would also exhibit some agency. Could even the Roman slaves have had some agency? Can we ever know, especially if, as Weil says, the afflicted are unable to speak, that we cannot really comprehend their level of suffering, and that they even sometimes pass by us unnoticed, where "we only notice that they have rather a strange way of behaving and we censure this behaviour".

Is it also a matter of being born into something and being used to it, of not knowing any different whereas if people like us were plunged into the same situation perhaps we would experience extreme affliction- but is there a 'getting used to' things like lack of human dignity, physical discomfort if not pain, and humiliation? Or is it wrong to conceive of it as a constant state, that people move in and out of affliction, as circumstances change and fluctuate. A more dynamic understanding of agency; or does real affliction mark the person out forever, crippling their will? If not in the irregular migrant, are there people in a state of total and complete affliction in the world?

Weil states that real compassion for the afflicted is an "impossibility", and that when it exists it is an "astounding miracle". This is because those who have never had contact with affliction can have no idea of what it is, indeed may not even recognise it. And those who suffer from it, "are in no state to help anyone at all, and they are almost incapable of even wishing to do so". So how are we to give compassion to a person in a state of extreme suffering that we don't understand, cannot even imagine?

Although requiring close to a 'miracle', Weil believes that it is possible to give compassion to the afflicted by developing what she calls 'attention'. She states that, "The afflicted need nothing else in this world except people capable of giving them attention". She outlines her concept of 'attention' in her notebooks, but most particularly in her essay, *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with A View to the Love of God*.

Her essay is a meditation on the purpose, use and practice of study. For Weil, underlying all academic study is the use of 'attention'- a concentrated focus on a particular object. This attention is marked by an ardent waiting with desire, and for Weil is elevated to the status of the sacred- it has the effect of lighting up the soul. Furthermore, her unique proposition is that study is a way for us to develop our capacity for this attention. In study we train ourselves to become more attentive. In fact, she states that, "the development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost sole interest of studies". The essay is an imaginative effort on Weil's part to make a connection between the attention used in study and the attention needed to be present for others, and ultimately with God.

The act of 'attention' is a concentrated, unwavering focus of energy on an object. It is not however, an act of will where we go in search of knowledge. In fact, if we do search, Weil contends that we will end up finding false truths rather than truth, because we do not have the ability to discern the difference between them. Instead, we can only wait with earnest attention for truth, like God, to come to us.

Attention therefore is inextricably linked to waiting. Attention is an emptying out of the self and a waiting for the object of our attention to penetrate us. Furthermore, she states that this waiting can only be led by desire, it can only be fuelled by our desire rather than by will power:

The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running.

This desire is important, because giving attention is a difficult act, and would be impossible to do by will power alone. On this, Weil explains:

There is something in our soul which has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves.

She links lack of attention with evil because it is essentially a refusal to see- a turning away from truth. This is particularly true when we are talking about looking at extreme suffering, something which we naturally turn away from. The only way to see what is real is by an intense focusing of all our attention on the object, led by desire and marked by a constant, enduring waiting.

Weil shows remarkable perceptiveness in her analysis of the difficulty of attention, and our need to turn away from it. It is a mark of our time and a common theme of our age that this lack of attention manifests as escapism and rampant addiction- our need to be endlessly entertained, boundless material consumption as well as other addictions like drink, drugs and food. In particular, with the advent of technology we have been able to think up of more and more sophisticated ways to feed our addictive tendencies. At the heart of it, at the heart of all addictions is a turning away from something, an inability to just stay still and simply pay attention.

Like the emptying out of the self that is needed in study, Weil states that this kind of attention is also needed when encountering the other, to be able to really see them and to be present for them:

The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth...only he who is capable of attention can do this.

This self-emptying kind of attention then could bridge the gap between ourselves and the other in extreme affliction, with whom we cannot relate to in their suffering. For Weil, this attention becomes absolutely necessary in relieving the suffering of another, in fact it is the only way and for this reason, it is crucial that we aim to develop our capacity for attention:

To love our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: what are you going through? It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way.

Attention then becomes a way of seeing when it is turned on the other; it is a capacity to see the other's distinctiveness and specificity. This is particularly needed in affliction where there is the addition of anonymity, where the afflicted suffers anonymously and without recognition, and where they are seen as no more than a thing by others. What people who are suffering need most is for someone to acknowledge their specific pain, to see them beyond a category. The extent that we are able to see and

acknowledge another's pain depends on our capacity for attention, which when turned on the other becomes an act of witnessing.

When Weil was working with the Free French Alliance in London, she wrote up a proposal for a *'Project for a Corps of Frontline Nurses'* (to which Charles De Gaulle, after reading the proposal responded with "Elle est folle!" She is mad!). She proposed that a group of nurses would join soldiers in the battle field, administering first aid on the ground. Not only would they help the immediate suffering of the soldiers, but would also bring an essential moral vitality: their presence would give precious comfort to the soldiers in their hour of suffering, a form of witnessing of their suffering. This demanded of the nurses a capacity for attention in order to be able to look directly at extreme suffering. Indispensable for witnessing suffering then is a capacity for a self-emptying attention, one that is able to displace the self from the centre of the universe in order to receive the other as they are. This emptying out was also important for Weil in order to receive God's grace.

If anything, Simone's greatest contribution for me is on how to witness another's suffering; for her this can only come from giving real attention. She underlines how difficult it is, but also how it is of the utmost important and the only thing that will truly help to alleviate the suffering of the other. In some ways I see my research as an act of witnessing- which requires the development of attention in the Weilian sense. And it is great that as I develop attention for 'study', at the same time I am developing attention that will be important for witnessing others. I'm sure it is a grand, overblown objective, and that the everyday experiences of actually being there doing fieldwork will pull me back to earth, as well as my own very limited capacities. Nonetheless, it will be interesting to document this process throughout my year in Morocco; the difficulties, if not impossibility, of really witnessing the other.

To the Red Virgin*

(Sentences in italics are taken from Simone Weil's factory diaries)

* This was the 'nickname' given to her at university

Precocious child
A star in a sea of grain
Flowing with the water
Yet resolutely against it

You grew up to be
No one else with your breadth
And depth
Your boundless self-discipline

Oh Simone
Sister, teacher, stern critic
You are for me.

'Painful morning - My legs hurt – I'm fed up, fed up...'

Eternal outsider, eternal light
I can only imagine how lonely you must have been
They ridiculed you-
But you had your eyes on a bigger prize
Beyond anything anyone could see

Oh Simone, I'm afraid
That I fall very short of your example
That I can't live up to your light

'I woke up in agony; I went to the factory in fear: I worked like a slave.'

Your words reach across space and time
Like an echo I heard long ago
Reaching some eternal part of me
Resonating

Explorer of suffering
And the human condition
Unflinching

'A worker made coils with the hooks a centimetre too short. The foreman said to him: "If they are screwed, you're screwed."

Deprived yourself of
Food
Consolation
False gods

Putting yourself beneath the lowest of the low
It is there you knew
You would find
Truth

In our day and age
We understand nothing about sacrifice
I'm afraid, Simone
That if you were alive now
They would still not listen to you

'The worker with tuberculosis was fired for having missed an order.'

They said you were
Crazy
Holy fool
You put your body on the line
Again and again

A Jew who did not want to be a Jew
A woman who did not want to be a woman
A bourgeois who refused to be privileged
I see how your own demons
Allowed you to empathise
With the oppressed

'At any moment, from clocking in to clocking out, a new order may come.'

You were marked by your hunger
Oh Simone, the hunger haunts me too
How did you bear it?
Did you let it grow inside you
Like a grain of gold
Precious
Hidden

'My sense of personal dignity as it has been manufactured by society has been completely broken.'

And at the moment of your death
Having lived your short life
As you had believed
You went away
Quietly
One
with
God.

May Ngo