

**“The intelligence  
can only be led by desire”**

**The Journey of  
Simone Weil**

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# Her Life and Times



## Early Life and Influences

Simone Weil was born in Paris on February 3, 1909. Her parents were agnostic, secular Jews, and her upbringing was marked by material comfort and intellectual stimulation. Her older brother André would become a renowned mathematician, and Simone herself attended the best schools France had to offer: the Lycée Henry-IV and then the École Normale Supérieure, where she graduated in philosophy in 1931 with a thesis on Descartes.

Apart from her family, she was most strongly influenced by her beloved philosophy teacher at the Lycée Henry-IV, Émile Chartier, better known as “Alain.” He communicated to her his deep distrust of all forms of authority and a love for the “little guys,” for the victims of power and injustice. Alain’s distrust of authority extended to religious authorities and expressed itself as anti-clericalism and secularism. However, the desire to reject worldly powers kept him from atheism and led him to embrace a form of secularized, highly moralistic Christianity. For Alain, however, God must be essentially powerless in order to be “worthy of man,” because “power dishonors even God....The attribute of power...must be taken as the shameful part of the religion of the spirit.”

These two aspects of Alain’s teaching — moral intransigence and secularism — were the starting point of Weil’s journey and marked her for the rest of her life.

## The Need for Justice

In fact, even before meeting Alain, since she was very young Weil displayed not only great intellectual gifts but also an unusual, even extreme, moral sensitivity. For example, at age five she refused the gift of a necklace because poor children had no such luxury, and one year later, during World War I, she demanded to eat no more sugar than was allotted to French soldiers at the front.

This was to be her signature gesture: if she thought someone was deprived of something somewhere, she wanted to experience the deprivation herself. Throughout her life, Weil displayed an uncanny capacity to empathize with the suffering, the vulnerable, and the underprivileged. She lived in unheated rooms because, she believed, workers could not afford to heat theirs; she ate poorly because that was how she thought the poor ate... Not only did she feel for others, but she also thought she had to push her life to its breaking point for them; in England, albeit seriously sick and exhausted, she didn't take the food she needed because the French under occupation were deprived of theirs (Costică Brădăţan, *In Praise of Failure*).

After graduation, Weil started working as a high school teacher, while also writing articles and essays on the side. In 1934 she took a one-year leave to work in a factory and share the plight of the workers.

In her writings from that time she lamented in strong terms the conditions of factory workers: they were kept in a “state of sub-human apathy,” a “submission” comparable to “slavery,” so that “humanity is divided into two categories”: those “who count for something” and those “who count for nothing.”

In 1936 she volunteered as a soldier on the Republican side in the Spanish civil war. This experience highlighted her extraordinary clumsiness, physical weakness and lack of practical skills.

Her military career ended almost immediately: she was so shortsighted that she could not aim a rifle, and after a few days at the front she seriously hurt herself by stepping into a camouflaged pot of cooking oil.

# The Rejection of Marxism

At that time, following the Leninist revolution, Marxist ideas were making a comeback in Europe. Weil was initially sympathetic, but soon discovered that the Marxist revolution was not about justice. According to Marx, the revolution is the inevitable result of the social and economic mechanisms that control the evolution of history. But Weil realized that there is no real reason to believe that such mechanisms are oriented towards liberation.

[According to Marx] since society is still poisoned, no mind is capable of attaining to truth and justice. Those who utter these words are liars or dupes of liars. He who desires to serve justice has only one method, namely, to hasten forward the operation of the mechanism that will bring about a non-poisoned society. It matters little what means he employs to this end; they are good, provided they are effective. Thus Marx arrived a morality which placed the social category to which he belonged — that of professional revolutionaries — above sin. Marx's revolutionary materialism consists in positing, on the one hand, that force alone governs social relations to the exclusion of anything else, and, on the other hand, that one day the weak, while remaining the weak, will nevertheless be the stronger. Marx was an idolater. The object of his idolatry was the society of the future (Oppression and Liberty).

The constant illusion of Revolution consists in believing that the victims of force, being innocent of the outrages that are committed, will use force justly if it is put into their hands. But except for souls which are fairly near to saintliness, the victims are defiled by force just as their tormentors are... So the victims thus put in power and intoxicated by the change do as much harm or more, and soon sink back again to where they were before (Gravity and Grace).

# The Greek Discovery of the Supernatural

Weil's critique of Marxism soon turned into a broader critique of the materialism and scientism of the Enlightenment and, simultaneously, into a rediscovery of the Greek philosophical tradition — Plato in particular. Plato was the philosopher who had discovered that there is "another reality," the world of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. For Weil, Platonic philosophy took on a strong religious significance: it was the discovery of the *supernaturel*, the supernatural.

Then what is Plato? A mystic, the inheritor of a mystical tradition which permeated the whole of Greece... The whole of Greek civilization is a search for bridges to relate human misery with the divine perfection.

But we possess hardly a trace of Greek spirituality earlier than Plato. [Greek spirituality] contains many things: That we are children of Heaven, which is to say, of God; that life on earth is forgetting; that here below we are in forgetfulness of the transcendent and supernatural truth.

And then that the condition for salvation is thirst; one must thirst for the forgotten truth until one feels one is dying of thirsts.

And finally that this thirst can certainly be quenched (God in Plato).

Above the earthly, carnal sphere in which our thoughts habitually move, and which is on every side an inextricable mixture of good and evil, there is another, a spiritual sphere, where good is only good and, even at the inferior level, produces only good; where evil is only evil and can produce nothing but evil. It is a direct consequence of faith in God. The absolute good is not only the very best good of all — it would then be a relative good — but the unique, total good, which comprises within itself in a superlative degree all forms of the good, including those which are sought by men who deviate from the path of absolute good (The Need for Roots).

## Person to Person

Because of her entirely secular background, Weil initially formulated her discovery of the supernatural dimension in strictly philosophical terms. Soon, however, something unexpected took place:

In 1937 I had two marvelous days in Assisi. There, alone in the little twelfth - century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, an incomparable marvel of purity where Saint Francis often used to pray, something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees (Waiting for God).

More mystical experiences followed. The next year, somebody introduced her to the poem "Love" by 17th-century English poet George Herbert. She learned it by heart and started repeating it often.

I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me.

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. I had vaguely heard of things of this kind, but I had never believed in them... Moreover, in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face.

Yet I still half refused, not my love but my intelligence. For it seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms (Waiting for God).

## "Love" by George Herbert

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
    My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.



## On the Threshold of the Church

Weil's mysterious encounter with Christ did not lead to a "conventional" conversion. Again, given her secular background and her preconceptions against the Church as a powerful institution, she had to bridge a great chasm between her "love" and her "intelligence." This struggle marked the remaining years of her life. Poignantly, she did not ask to be baptized (except possibly on her death bed).

Christianity should contain all vocations without exception since it is catholic. In consequence the Church should also. But in my eyes Christianity is catholic by right but not in fact. So many things are outside it, so many things that I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence... Christianity being Catholic by right but not in fact, I regard it as legitimate on my part to be a member of the Church by right but not by fact, not only for a time, but for my whole life if needs be.

I should betray the truth, that is to say the aspect of truth that I see, if I left the point, where I have been since my birth, at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity. I have always remained at this exact point, on the threshold of the Church, without moving... only now my heart has been transported, forever, I hope, into the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar (Waiting for God).

## The Final Years

In the late 1930's, Weil's health, which had never been good, started deteriorating. In June 1940, as the German army was approaching, she left Paris with her family and moved to Marseilles.

A few months later she was introduced to Fr. Joseph-Marie Perrin OP, who became a close friend and spiritual advisor, and with whom she discussed at length the question of her possible baptism. Father Perrin also introduced her to Gustave Thibon, a local Catholic who invited Weil to live and work on his farm. After the war, Thibon took up the task of publishing some of her most important works.

In May 1942, Weil and her family traveled to New York. While her parents and brother remained in the US (where André Weil would later become a world-famous mathematician and join the faculty at Princeton), Simone was soon called to London to serve under the French government in exile.

In London she was commissioned to write a planning document for the rebuilding of the French government after the war. This document became her final, and arguably most important, book: *The Need for Roots*. In the same period she also wrote her last major essay, *Human Personality*, and the *Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations*, which she called her "profession of faith."

As her health kept deteriorating, she was admitted to a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent. Her doctor attributed part of her decline to malnutrition, due to her desire to share in the hardships of the people she had left in France. She finally died on August 29, 1943, at the age of 34.

# The Trajectory of Her Thought



## Secularity as a Starting Point

To understand Weil's experience, it is important to remember her starting point.

As soon as I reached adolescence, I saw the problem of God as a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong solution, which seemed to me the greatest possible evil, was to leave it alone. So I left it alone. I neither affirmed nor denied anything. It seemed to me useless to solve the problem, for I thought that, being in this world, our business was to adopt the best attitude with respect to the problems of this world, and that such an attitude did not depend upon the solution of the problem of God (Waiting for God).

This position is exactly what other authors have called secularism.

God is not necessarily eliminated by this new conception of man, i.e., of man understood as totally autonomous, capable of self-realization and the realization of his own plans. What does occur, however, is something far subtler. Cornelio Fabro summed it up well: "If God does exist, he doesn't matter." God has nothing concrete to do with man. God is now extrinsic to human cares and human problems (Luigi Giussani, Religious Awareness in Modern Man).

This is a very common position today: answering the question of God is irrelevant to the problems we really have to face. In fact, it is both an embarrassing and an unsolvable problem, embarrassing because unsolvable. At most, it can be answered in the private sphere of our existence, which does not interfere with the public sphere. Weil's itinerary is exactly the opposite (Augusto Del Noce, The Age of Secularization).

## From Secularism to Religiosity

Weil's thought must be seen as a journey away from secularism and towards religiosity. This accounts for her more extreme statements and for her recurring gnostic temptation to reabsorb Christianity into Greek thought. These flaws simply reflect that fact that hers was a work in progress.

The ideal itinerary of today's man towards faith is represented by Weil's experience... Her thought must not be examined as a system, but as an itinerary, emphasizing that what guides and sustains it is the idea of morality (the idea of justice inscribed in the human heart). Then its uniqueness becomes apparent... If we try to condense her teaching into a formula, I think the least inadequate may be following: the religious dimension can be rediscovered starting from the crisis of our times if the crisis is lived with absolute moral purity (Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*).

The starting point of her trajectory was her moral radicalism and the realization that justice cannot be brought about by the mere exercise of power.

Force is not a machine for automatically creating justice. It is a blind mechanism which produces indiscriminately and impartially just or unjust results, but, by all the laws of probability, nearly always unjust ones (*The Need for Roots*).

## A Different Type of Reality

Weil began to realize that justice does have its own reality, but a different reality from that of the material world. As she wrote near the end of her life:

For the last two or three centuries, people have believed that force rules supreme over all natural phenomena, and at the same time that men can and should base their mutual relations upon justice, recognized as such through the application of reason. This is a flagrant absurdity. It is inconceivable that everything in the universe should be entirely subjected to the rule of force and that Man should be able to escape the effects of this... Either we must perceive at work in the universe, alongside force, a principle of a different kind, or else we must recognize force as being the unique and sovereign ruler over human relations also.

Thus, starting from her radical need for goodness and justice, Weil came to discover what she called the *supernatural*, the supernatural.

Where force is absolutely sovereign, justice is absolutely unreal. Yet justice cannot be that. We know it experimentally. It is real enough in the hearts of men. The structure of a human heart is just as much of a reality as any other in this universe, neither more nor less of a reality than the trajectory of a planet... If justice is ineradicable from the heart of Man, it must have a reality in this world. It is science, then, which is mistaken (The Need for Roots).

## Recovering the Religious Sense

Weil's discovery of the supernatural (the infinite, the transcendent) meant the rediscovery of the religious sense, particularly the true scope of human desire, or what she calls "the needs of the soul."

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.

Corresponding to this reality, at the center 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.

That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligations.

At the center 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 (Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations).

The tragedy of the modern world is the systematic reduction of this longing. A scientific-reductionistic view of humanity, in fact, can only recognize certain limited desires.

# Five Weilian Themes





# Justice

As we have seen, the concern for justice was one of the most important aspects of Weil's personality. However, crucially, for her the human desire for justice is always tied to an (initially inchoate) sense of the sacred.

At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.

The good is the only source of the sacred. There is nothing sacred except the good and what pertains to it.

This profound and childlike and unchanging expectation of good in the heart is not what is involved when we agitate for our rights. The motive which prompts a little boy to watch jealously to see if his brother has a slightly larger piece of cake arises from a much more superficial level of the soul. The word justice means two very different things according to whether it refers to the one or the other level. It is only the former one that matters (Human Personality).

# Human Rights

In turn, the desire for justice is the point of contact between the religious and the ethical-political spheres. Detaching justice from the experience of the sacred makes the modern concept of rights abstract and ineffective. The longing for the infinite is the true source of human rights.

There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned. This 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. This obligation is not based upon any convention; for all conventions are liable to be modified according to the wishes of the contracting parties, whereas in this case no change in the mind and will of Man can modify anything whatsoever. This obligation is an eternal one. It is coextensive with the eternal destiny of human beings. Only human beings have an eternal destiny. Human collectivities have not got one (The Need for Roots).

Furthermore, for Weil societies exist and have value only to serve people's "eternal destiny" by preserving the accumulated wisdom of those who traveled the same road in the past.

We owe our respect to a collectivity, of whatever kind — country, family or any other — not for itself, but because it is food for a certain number of human souls. ... each is unique, and, if destroyed, cannot be replaced. ... It contains food, not only for the souls of the living, but also for the souls of beings yet unborn. ... A collectivity has its roots in the past. It constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living (ibidem).

## Rootedness

Thus, the religious dimension is also the only possible source of true human community. Belonging to a community that nourishes “the needs of the soul” is the definition of a fundamental Weilian concept: “rootedness” (*enracinement*).

A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part (The Need for Roots).

Conversely, uprooting is the fraying of all bonds with the community, with the past and (as a result) with the supernatural.

Uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed, for it is a self-propagating one. For people who are really uprooted there remain only two possible sorts of behavior: either to fall into a spiritual lethargy resembling death ... or to hurl themselves into some form of activity necessarily designed to uproot, often by the most violent methods, those who are not yet uprooted, or only partly so (ibidem).

# Truth

Another fundamental human need is the need for truth, which for Weil is not the same as knowledge. Knowledge can be strictly instrumental, a tool to gain power over nature and people. The need for truth is fundamentally a need to connect with reality, because reality is beautiful—it attracts us.

Truth is the radiant manifestation of reality. Truth is not the object of love but reality. To desire truth is to desire direct contact with a piece of reality. To desire contact with a piece of reality is to love. We desire truth in order to love in truth. We desire to know the truth about what we love (The Need for Roots).

Unfortunately, we live in an age of “scientism” in which truth is not valued for its own sake. Now, even science loses its initial motivation (the study of the beauty of nature) and becomes a merely technical exercise. Religion itself is affected by scientism and for many people it becomes what Weil calls a “pink pill,” that is, a “drug” used to increase psychological well-being.

The spirit of truth is nowadays almost absent from religion and from science and from the whole of thought. The appalling evils in the midst of which we struggle, without even managing to understand quite how tragic they are, are due entirely to that.

Dostoevsky uttered the most frightful blasphemy when he said: ‘If Christ is not the truth, I prefer to remain outside the truth with Christ.’ Christ said: ‘I am the truth.’ He also said that He was bread and wine; but He added: ‘I am the true bread, the true wine,’ that is to say, the bread which is nothing but truth, the wine which is nothing but truth. They must first of all be desired as truth, only afterwards as food (The Need for Roots).

# Attention

For Weil, the spirit of truth can only be recovered through attention, which she regards as the most important intellectual and moral attitude, to the point of identifying it with prayer:

We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will... Attention taken to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. If we turn our mind towards the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself. Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious.

The authentic and pure values — truth, beauty and goodness — in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object (Gravity and Grace).

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object... We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits.

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention (Waiting for God).

## A Personal Conclusion: Simone Weil's "Prologue"

He came into my room and said, 'You poor wretch, who understand nothing and know nothing – come with me and I'll teach you things you have no idea of.' I followed him.

He took me into a church. It was new and ugly. He led me before the altar and said, 'Kneel.' I told him, 'I have not been baptized.' He said, 'Fall on your knees before this place, with love, as before the place where truth exists.' I obeyed.

He led me out and, up to a garret from whose window I could see the whole town, some wooden scaffolding, the river where boats were unloading. He made me sit down.

We were alone. He talked. Now and then somebody else would come in, join in the conversation, then go away again.

It was no longer winter; it was not yet spring. The trees' branches were bare and without buds, in a cold air full of sunshine.

The light rose, shone bright, and then faded, and the stars and moon shone through the window. Then the dawn rose again.

Sometimes he paused and took some bread from a cupboard, and we shared it.

That bread truly had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again.

He poured wine for me and for himself which, tasted of the sun and of the soil on which that city had been built.

Sometimes we lay down on the open floor, and the sweetness of sleep descended on me. Then I woke up, and drank the light of the sun.

He had promised me teaching, but he taught me nothing. We talked in a rambling way about all sorts of things, as old friends do.

One day he said to me, 'Now go away.' I threw myself down, clung to his knees, begged him not to send me away. But he flung me out towards the stairs.

I descended them as if unconscious, as if my heart was torn in shreds. I walked through the streets; and then I realized that I had no idea where that house was.

I have never tried to find it again. I saw that he had come for me by mistake. My place is not in that garret. It is anywhere, in a prison cell, in some bourgeois parlour full of trinkets and red plush, in a station waiting-room. No matter where, but not in that garret.

Sometimes I cannot prevent myself from repeating, in fear and compunction, a little of what he said to me. How am I to know if I remember it correctly? He is not there to tell me.

I well know that he doesn't love me. How could he love me? And yet there is something deep in me, some point of myself, which cannot prevent itself from thinking, with fear and trembling, that perhaps, in spite of everything, he does love me. (First and Last Notebooks)

## A Philosophical Conclusion: Weil, Nietzsche, and Plato

As we learned last year, we live in the age of Nietzsche, the thinker who called into question the value of the truth and proclaimed the death of God. He perceived a conflict between transcendental ideals of truth and justice, on the one hand, and the demands of life, of vitality, on the other. Simone Weil takes the exact opposite view, by affirming that truth, justice, and the supernatural are necessary for a really human life, including the political sphere. By centering authentic human needs, she establishes the only possible “healthy” link between religiosity and politics.

As a final text, we turn to a passage by Ratzinger on Plato, which encapsulates what we think is the deepest aspect of Weil’s thought.

*For Plato, what is important is that justice is truth and so reality. The truth of justice is more real than mere biological life and individual self-assertion. In comparison with justice and truth, mere biological existence appears as outright unreality, a shadow cast by the real, whereas the person who lives by justice lives the really real.*

*Such a thought provides a fresh foundation for politics and so a new possibility for the polis as a community. At the same time Plato gives it a grounding of a religious kind. In developing this insight by reference to religious tradition, he wishes to identify primordial springs of wisdom which may take the place of the shallow religiosity of the by-now-faded myths. The philosophical martyrdom of Socrates belongs in this context. It is both a political martyrdom and a testimony to the greater degree of reality to be found in justice as opposed to simply biological existence.*

*[Plato’s] philosophy finds its center in the idea of justice. It developed in a political crisis, and derives from the conviction that the polis cannot stand wherever justice is something other than reality and truth. The recognition of the living power of truth, which includes the thought of immortality, is not part of a philosophy of flight from the world, but is in an eminent sense political philosophy....*

*Man to survive biologically must be more than bios. He must be able to die into a more authentic life than this. The certainty that self-abandonment for the sake of truth is self-abandonment to reality and not a step into the night of nothingness is a necessary condition for justice. But justice is the condition on which the life of the polis endures. In the final analysis, therefore, justice makes possible biological survival itself (Ratzinger, Eschatology).*

Socrates, who accepts to die in order to witness to the polis a “greater degree of reality to be found in justice,” is probably the best image of Simone Weil’s own life and death.