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Simone Weil's *Lectures on Philosophy*: A Comment

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Abstract.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to some intellectual origins of Simone Weil's philosophy through a summary of and comment on her *Lectures on Philosophy* (1978) given when she was a teacher in a girls' school at Roanne in the Loire region of central France. There is a brief *Introduction* followed by a summary of Weil's life which indicates her various interests as a religious thinker, mystic, anarchist, and political activist and some of the important academic commentaries on these aspects of her life and work. The source of the *Lectures on Philosophy* edited by her pupil Anne Reynaud-Guérithault is then discussed followed by a detailed summary of and comment on the *Lectures* themselves. They are grouped under five headings which are considered in turn. These are: The materialist point of view; after the discovery of mind; politics and social theory; ethics and aesthetics; miscellaneous topics and essay plans. There is a further discussion of Simone Weil's later philosophical thought which shows that what she published reveals classical learning and intellectual quality, but also the several antinomies with which she struggled in her thinking, the two major influences on her thought being Ancient Greece and Christianity. There is a short *Conclusion* and *Bibliography*.

Key words: Simone Weil, lectures, philosophical thought, Ancient Greece, Christianity, Judaism.

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Introduction

Simone Weil (1909—1943) is known as a religious thinker, mystic, anarchist, and political activist who has inspired several biographies, notably by her school friend Simone Pétrement [4] and by David McLellan [2], and much critical comment, for example on her attitude to Judaism [3] and to dialogue and education [1. P. 109—126]. Simone Weil had a short, disturbed, but varied and active life including a year as a work-

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er at the Renault factory in Paris, a brief period with an anarchist column during the Spanish Civil War, a fractious personal encounter with Leon Trotsky, and a short time as a farm labourer in Provençal. She wrote many articles, political, religious and philosophical, and several books, becoming well-known only after her death in 1943 from what seems to have been self-imposed starvation. This was at Kent in England, where she is buried, after leaving Occupied and collaborationist Vichy France.

The best known of her books are *The Need for Roots: prelude towards a declaration of duties towards mankind*, written when she was with de Gaulle and the Free French forces in England but not published in France until 1949; *Oppression and Liberty* a work of political theory in which she considers the causes and course of both historic and contemporary political and social oppression; *Gravity and Grace* which shows how Weil was making a personal transition from political activism to spiritual introspection; *Waiting for God* which is an important reflection on Weil's religious and mystical concerns. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* should also be considered for the very personal insights they give into the development of her thinking. The purpose of this short article is to introduce the reader to some intellectual origins of Simone Weil's philosophy through a summary of and comment on her *Lectures on Philosophy* [13] given when she was a teacher at a girls' school at Roanne in the Loire region of central France.

Who was Simone Weil?

Simone Weil was born in Paris on 3rd February 1909 to an assimilated and secular Jewish family. In fact, Weil was ten years old before she discovered that she was Jewish as her parents did not wish to emphasise differences between Jews and Gentiles. Her father, Dr. Bernard Weil, was a successful medical doctor with a private practice and her mother Madame Selma (Salomea) Weil was known as an active and intelligent woman. Their dedication to the education of their children, the elder boy André, later a prominent mathematician, and Simone, is well known.

In October 1925, Simone Weil entered the Lycée Henri IV, one of the most prestigious schools in Paris. There she was prepared for the *cagne (khâgne)* by Alain (the pen name of Émile-Auguste Chartier), an inspirational teacher who influenced an entire generation of young French philosophers. This was required if she were to proceed to one of the *grand écoles*, created on the initiative of Napoleon Bonaparte and regarded as the élite institutions of French higher education, and then separate from the university system.

Weil gained admission to the famous École Normale Supérieure, an institution which has many celebrated alumni such as Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida. It was a considerable achievement for a female student in the 1920s. At the École Normale Supérieure Weil continued to study philosophy and was awarded a *diplôme d'études supérieures* for a dissertation on *Science and Perfection in Descartes*. In the same year she received the *agrégation* which qualified her to teach in the French system of public education and was appointed as a philosophy teacher in a girls' secondary school at Le Puy, a town in south-west France.

The Source of the *Lectures on Philosophy*

Simone Weil taught philosophy at several girls' secondary schools between 1931 and 1938. It was at a school in Roanne, during the school year 1933 to 1934, that Simone Weil prepared and gave a series of lectures on philosophy to her young female students. She was an unorthodox teacher who refused to co-operate with the school over assessment marks and class rankings which she considered bureaucratic and oppressive, and prejudicial to what she considered authentic understanding and learning on the part of her students. This led to criticism and calls for her resignation from school establishments and from parents, as such information was essential to the progress of individuals through the French public education system; as Simone Weil should have known from the educational path that she herself had followed. However, as Anne Reynaud-Guérithault, one of her students at Roanne, has written: 'Simone Weil was too straightforward, too honest to 'cram us for exams in lessons, and keep her real thinking for other times' [13. P. 25].

It is thanks to Anne Reynaud-Guérithault that we have a published record of the Lectures which are based on her notes of what was said by Simone Weil. She emphasises that Simone Weil did not dictate notes mechanically. In considering them it is important to remember as she says that: 'These notes of her [Simone Weil's] lectures which are, I believe, very revelatory of her thinking at that time, are published here, with very little editing, more or less as they were written down by a seventeen-year-old adolescent'. She continues: '*So these published notebooks are not a text produced by Simone Weil* and one might be mistaken in attributing to her some remark taken out of its context. But at least I hope that the notes, taken as a whole, present a faithful reflection of her thought. I prefer not to burden them with comments of my own' [13. P. 25]. The italics are those of Anne Reynaud-Guérithault.

The published Lectures are grouped under five headings which we shall consider in turn. They are:

1. The materialist point of view.
2. After the discovery of mind.
3. Politics and social theory.
4. Ethics and aesthetics.
5. Miscellaneous topics and essay plans.

It was an ambitious and challenging syllabus for seventeen-year-old girls, one that shows that Simone Weil respected them as intellectual equals, potentially at least, who would respond seriously if themselves taken seriously. It indicates her intention to educate in thinking and understanding rather than to indoctrinate in what we might now describe as politically correct opinions, although her own points of view are made clear throughout. The topics are presented as problems to which a solution is sought, each being illustrated plentifully through examples from everyday life and experience as well as from philosophy, history, literature, painting and the plastic arts, music, the natural sciences and indeed wherever something apt may be found. The sheer range of examples that Simone Weil calls upon is itself an illustration of her erudition. It was flexible and educative teaching and exceptionally innovative for its time. Each chapter in the published version of *Lectures on Philosophy* is preceded by an epigraph, successively from Weil herself, Plato, Spinoza, Marcus Aurelius, Socrates and Kant. These may have been chosen by Anne Reynaud-Guérithault specifically for the publication.

The Lectures on Philosophy

The materialist point of view

These lectures were intended to provide the student with a sound understanding of the fundamental issues involved in philosophical materialism and the objections to it. These are identified as *method in psychology, perception, intellectual operations, language, reasoning, and in search of mind*. These are dealt with systematically, again through a series of sub-sections.

Method in psychology considers reflexes, instinct, the role of the body in actions, in feeling, in thought, the senses and sensations: sight, touch *etc.*, the sense of movement, sensations and time. *Perception* considers the role of imagination and of memory. On intellectual operations considers general ideas, the problems of abstraction, comparison, association of ideas, scientific reasoning, associationism and its criticism. Language considers kinds of language, as a means of creating conditioned reflexes, language as having a reality of its own, as something easy to handle, as a means of coming to grips with the world, the two ways in which we come to grips with the world, as the only source of method, the influence which society has on the individual through language, language badly used. Reasoning considers the syllogism, mathematical reasoning, the natural sciences, experiment and hypotheses. In search of mind considers the duality of human nature, an active and a passive being, the distinction between thoughts which are conceived by the imagination and thoughts conceived by understanding and the fundamental difference between contingent thoughts and those compelled by necessity; the notion of necessity. It is concluded: 'It is only those actions and thoughts which have a necessity about them that are truly human' [13. P. 89].

Two of Simone Weil's examples must suffice. On conditioned reflexes she refers to the well-known experiments of the Russian physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849—1936) an example which she develops through further instances. She says: 'Everything that we see suggests some kind of movement, however imperceptible. (A chair suggests sitting down, stairs, climbing up, etc.)' [13. P. 31]. Again, she claims that: 'The love of Phaedra, for example, can be completely explained by reflex action: she loves Hippolytus because he reminds her of Theseus, but she hates him because the very word adultery arouses in her a reflex of horror. The two reflexes are contradictory: the situation is one she cannot get out of, it can only be resolved by death' [13. P. 39]. This is an early indication of Weil's concern with the relationship between philosophy and morality.

After the discovery of mind

According to Anne Reynaud-Guérithault the epigraph 'No one without geometry admitted' (Plato) was one adopted by the class. The lectures are again presented systematically and consider: Mind: its characteristics; the general importance of the question of mind; Freud and the subconscious; degrees of consciousness; unconsciousness; the subconscious; moral importance (the 'choice'); personality; the self as existing in the present; identity in time; judgement; the distinctions which logicians make; different theories of judgement; reasoning; by hypothesis; by analogy; deduction; space and

time; causality; the value of knowledge; order; mathematical invention; experiment; the value and application of deduction; what is missing in deduction; verification; induction; reasonings by analogy; two conceptions of the experimental sciences; quantum theory; and biology. This is a comprehensive range of relevant topics and a set of sophisticated issues and, as we have noted exceptionally ambitious and challenging for secondary-school students.

We shall consider some of Simone Weil's observations to illustrate her method of teaching philosophy. She points out that classical philosophy did not raise the question of degrees of consciousness because '...there was no idea of an unconscious psychological life. However: 'Leibniz introduced this notion in the following way: he remarked that when one is occupied with something and a very faint noise occurs one does not hear it (a drip of water); nevertheless, one hears the sound of rain (a great number of drops). Leibniz came to the following conclusion: a conscious perception is made up of a number of unconscious perceptions. This is the theory of minute perceptions' [13. P. 91]. This theory might be used to explain what the Hungarian physical chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi described much later as the *tacit dimension* of knowledge [5].

On the value of knowledge Weil says: 'All this is very important. One sees that all our knowledge is hypothetical (in the sense that the celestial sphere is an hypothesis Nevertheless, to explain nature is the only way we have of thinking of it as an obstacle to our acting in a methodical way. Science is inadequate, but it is only when we understand this that our science has a value... One might say, with the pragmatists, that all science reduces itself to a process of action on nature, but it is necessary to add the word methodical. Reality comes into view when we see that nature is not only an obstacle which allows us to act in an ordered way comes into view when we see that nature is not only an obstacle which allows us to act in an ordered way, but is also an obstacle which infinitely transcends us' [13. P. 111]. She goes on to say that: 'Verification is not something which is straightforward. One might say that it is what is most difficult in science. It is what the Greeks failed at, and that for technical reasons, because apparatus has to be prepared in order to obtain data that can be measured... one must start with hypotheses. The hypothesis is in the end confirmed by the verification'. She concludes: 'In verification, one is able to set aside the divinity of the world and assign everything to mind' [13. P. 120]. This is an early indication of Weil's concern with the relationship between science and religion.

Politics and social theory

In these lectures Weil focused on political philosophy and the social world. The epigraph from Spinoza is illustrative of what it contains. It says: 'Not to laugh at what human beings do, nor to be disgusted by it, but to understand it' [13. P. 129]. It adopts an historical and to some extent a descriptive perspective. The following topics are considered: Sociology: how one is to think of it; the great sociologists; Auguste Comte; Karl Marx; social oppression in history; serfdom in Egypt; slavery in Greece and Rome; feudalism; the theoretical problem of oppression; economic life and the way it works; history and science and again Comte and Marx; property; how can money yield interest;

economic power; collective work and method; big industry and the firm; bureaucracy; the helplessness of the individual; the present state of affairs; workers as ‘things’ in big business; palliatives; coercion: the ‘rights of men’ are trampled underfoot; duties towards the state; different views of the state; Machiavelli and *The Prince*; Rousseau; Marx and Lenin; enlightened despotism; a republic; a democratic state; a completely co-operative state; monarchy; A fascist state; Russia; the right practical attitude towards the state; international relations or the foreign policy of the state; diplomacy; colonisation; Conclusion: The relations of the individual with society.

It is again a comprehensive and challenging set of lectures. Weil doesn’t follow a linear progression strictly but returns to certain topics when she thinks it appropriate, a further example of her flexible approach to teaching. It is worth noting that Emile Durkheim and Max Weber are not included on her list of ‘the great sociologists’. There is also no specific consideration of sociological experience in the capitalist democracy of the United States of America, such as Fordism or Taylorism. Again, feminism and the rights of women are, surprisingly given the occasion for the *Lectures*, considered only *inter alia* and not specifically. Indeed, neither the United States nor feminism are mentioned in the index. These apart, these lectures focus on political and social issues with which Weil was herself most concerned; and provide greater scope for possible partisan persuasion than do the other sections.

Simone Weil deals with this possibility beginning: ‘Sociology is the last of the sciences in point of time. One might say that it doesn’t yet exist. Generally, people always deal with social questions in such a way as to arouse passions. A scientific study of society should enable us to see what kind of society it is that would be the least oppressive in the given conditions’ [13. P. 129]. This is an early indication of her concern for a fundamental problem that she considered in *Oppression and Liberty* (1958). She adds: ‘The whole problem of politics comes to this: to find in conditions as they are, a form of society which would conform to the demands of reason and which at the same time would take into account necessities of a less important kind...A method as materialist as this is absolutely necessary if good intentions are to be changed into actions. It is absurd to want to reform society by reforming individuals’ [13. P. 130]. This is an early indication of a dilemma that arose for Weil in her later political and religious thinking.

Weil concludes with a brief consideration of the relations of the individual with society and an open commitment to social change. She argues: ‘The idea in accordance with which society should be ordered is co-operation, that is to say exchange of labour. This is the only kind of relationship which agrees with Kant’s formulation of the moral law: to treat human beings always as ends’ [13. P. 163]. This is a clear rejection of the Marxist-Leninist argument that the end justifies the means. Distinguishing an authentic education of the masses from state propaganda as a means of changing social conditions, she asks what then can one do? She concludes that: ‘If one stops oneself thinking of all this, one makes oneself an accomplice in what is happening. One has to do something quite different: take one’s place in this system of things and do something about it’ [13. P. 164]. Simone Weil was not, of course, a Marxist, but this is reminiscent of Marx’s famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach: ‘Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’.

Ethics and aesthetics

In these lectures Simone Weil considers philosophical perspectives on ethics and aesthetics, returning to some issues and themes such as the mind-body problem that she considered earlier. The epigraph reads: ‘If the world is divine, all is well; if the world is given over to chance, don’t allow yourself to go the same way. Thought, freed from passions, is a fortress’ (Marcus Aurelius). The topics that Weil covered were: Morals founded on something other than conscience; morals based on interest; morality based on instinct; sociological moralities; theological morality. God (or the gods); The true foundations of morality; Kant and the categorical imperative; the rational moralists; Socrates; Plato; the Cynics; the Stoics; Descartes; Rousseau; Kant again; the psychology of the aesthetic sense; the role of the body and feeling; mind and understanding; harmony of body and mind in what is beautiful; conclusion: the moral value of art.

This is again a complex and challenging set of lectures. Here are some examples that illustrate her teaching. On sociological moralities, referring briefly to Durkheim and to Lévy-Bruhl, she says that the proofs offered are, first the resemblances between different moralities of the same period, whatever the foundations are e.g. the Stoics and the Epicureans and, secondly, the differences between the moralities of different periods. She says, for example, that: ‘Family morality changes with the structure of society. It is because of social attitude that adultery is considered to be more serious in a woman than a man’ [13. P. 169]. However, changes may be seen within the same period. For example, in a reference to opinion during the French Revolution, she says: ‘The very feelings which it was necessary to tone down if one exhibited them in 1789, had to be exaggerated in 1792 to make any impression at all’ [13. P. 170]. On theological morality she comments: ‘Every attempt to base morality on theology destroys both morality and theology. One shouldn’t say “I have to do this because it is God’s will”, but “God wills it because I have to do it”. In that case, God simply gives one the strength to do it’ [13. P. 172].

This brings Weil to a consideration of Immanuel Kant and the categorical imperative. ‘Do what you should, come what may. This is a categorical imperative, not a hypothetical one’. She adds: ‘But what Kant said is quite negative: it eliminates some things, but it does not give us any end... For a reasonable being there can only be one end: reason itself. A reasonable being is an end in himself in so far as he is a being who thinks. To sacrifice oneself as a thinking being is the destruction of virtue’ [13. P. 173].

Weil’s discussion of aesthetics is encapsulated in an epigraph from her philosophical mentor Alain that she offered to her students. It says: ‘Beauty is the meeting place of the mind with nature, where mind recognises its good. There the true miracles, which reconcile what is noble and base in man, take place’ (Weil, 1978, 184). In these lectures Simone Weil continues her discussion of the relationship between mind and body, concluding with a comment on the moral value of art which is that: ‘It teaches us that mind can come down into nature. Morality itself tells us to act according to thoughts that are true. Beauty is a witness that the ideal can become a reality’ [13. P. 189].

Miscellaneous topics and essay plans

The final part of the *Lectures on Philosophy* identifies important issues from the previous lectures, useful for revision. Certainly, the topics are presented much more succinctly and with fewer examples than in the earlier lectures. The first is self-knowledge introduced by a pair of epigraphs: ‘Know thyself’ (Socrates) and ‘We only know what we appear to be’ (Kant). The topics and essay plans continue as: love of truth, sacrifice, philosophy and metaphysics, the relativity of knowledge, error, time, intuition and deduction, introspection and voluntary and involuntary actions; attention; will and the emotions; thought and the emotions; imagination in literary creation and in scientific thought; courage; suicide; justice and charity; abstract ideas; Roger Bacon: ‘Man can only gain control over nature by obeying it’; Plato and *The Republic*. This might itself be considered a philosophical syllabus and is representative of themes that recur in Simone Weil’s writing subsequently. It was also of practical value in helping students clarify and take ownership of what they have learned.

Simone Weil’s Philosophical Thought

The *Lectures on Philosophy* are, of course, only an early indication of Simone Weil’s philosophical thought rather than its mature statement. It should be remembered that Simone Weil was herself only twenty-four years old at the time. Indeed, because of her disturbed life and early death she was never able to achieve such a mature philosophy (or theology). Weil’s philosophy is as a result inchoate and fragmentary. What she published shows clearly both classical learning and intellectual quality, but also the several antinomies with which she struggled in her thinking. What then are the most important aspects of Simone Weil’s later work that should be noted?

The two major influences on her thought were Ancient Greece and Christianity. Weil’s preference for Christianity over Judaism is found in modern European philosophy from Spinoza to Hegel (and in her early mentor Alain) as a tendency that separates Christianity mistakenly from its Jewish roots. Weil could not believe, when reading *The Old Testament* how the Jews, so engaged in war and conquest, could have been acting from Divine inspiration. She considered the *Old Testament* theology of the Ancient Hebrews and the imperialism of Ancient Rome to be early historical examples of totalitarianism which had corrupted Christianity. She considered that the ideal was to be found in Ancient Greece which through its *Dramatic Tragedies* had recognised an existential human misery and, according to her, this and other aspects of Ancient Greek culture anticipated Christianity [11]. Homer’s *Iliad* she described as ‘the poem of force’ [15].

Weil is perhaps best known for her concepts of attention, silence, and necessity which are always present in her personal life and thought. They are usually discussed in relation to her theological views and have implications for education. However, it is less known that Weil also discusses a specific dimension of dialogue in her work. For Weil, dialogue was a relation of power mediated by language and words. Peter Winch explains that although what has been published of Weil in English ‘...often contain discussions of themes which exercise Anglo-Saxon academic philosophers, these occur in contexts, and in a style, which may create the impression that their bearing on the central concerns of such philosophers is at best a glancing one’ [13. P. 2]. The *Lectures on Philosophy* he distinguishes ‘...from most of Simone Weil’s writings in being

directly concerned with fundamental ‘philosophical’ issues’ while remaining cautious about the way in which she moves between philosophy and other concerns, especially religious meditation [13. P. 2].

To overcome such prejudice, Winch makes a valuable comparison between the thought of Simone Weil as found in the *Lectures on Philosophy* and that of Ludwig Wittgenstein which was being developed during the same years. Two brief examples are given here: of similarity and of difference. The reader is otherwise referred to Peter Winch’s excellent discussion. First, ‘...on the empiricist view time becomes an unbridgeable gulf between one experience and another. We need an account which, on the contrary, will include time as a form of connection between experiences. Simone Weil’s account, like Wittgenstein’s achieves this by making the notion of *action* central’. He continues: ‘A staircase is something to be climbed, a chair something to be sat in: compare Wittgenstein’s remark: “It is part of the grammar of the word ‘chair’ that this is what we call ‘to sit on a chair’” As Simone Weil expresses it: ‘everything that we see suggests some kind of movement’ [13. P. 12]. Secondly: ‘I have noted how, like Wittgenstein, she looks for the roots of the notion of necessity in human activities and techniques, but she is not struck in quite the same way as he is by the great *diversity* of such techniques. This led Wittgenstein to see a parallel diversity in the sense of terms like ‘necessary’ [13. P. 16].

Conclusion

This article has provided a comment on the life and work of Simone Weil. The focus has been on her early thought as discerned in the *Lectures on Philosophy* [13] given at a girls’ secondary school in 1933 to 1934 and published from notes prepared by one of her students. The record is a valuable one, although it does not give any idea of the nature of any discussion that may have taken place. Anne Reynaud-Guérithault, to whom we owe this published record of Simone Weil’s teaching, was obviously an attentive and probably responsive student. This is not to say that her classmates each had the same qualities or at least not to the same extent. Simone Weil’s students were not always successful in public examinations, something that contributed to official criticism of her. Nevertheless, as Peter Winch says: ‘The freshness and boldness of this book, along with its accessibility to anyone who is prepared to think for himself about the issues it raises, seem to me to make it in many ways ideal as an introduction to philosophy. It could very usefully be used alongside, say, that valuable old war-horse, Bertrand Russell’s *Problems of Philosophy*, treating as it does much the same sort of question from such a very different point of view’ [16. P. 22].

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«Лекции по философии» Симоны Вейль: комментарий

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Цель данной статьи состоит в том, чтобы познакомить читателя с интеллектуальными предпосылками философской мысли Симоны Вейль, посредством краткого изложения и комментария к «Лекциям по философии» (1978), прочитанным ею в период преподавания в Роанской школе для девочек в департаменте Луара во Франции. Статья содержит комментарии к «Лекциям по философии» Симоны Вейль. В кратком *Введении* представлено изложение биографии Вейль, которое отражает ее интересы как религиозной мыслительницы, мистика, анархистки и политической активистки, сопровождаемое комментариями этих аспектов ее жизни. Далее представляется источник «Лекций по философии» под редакцией ученицы Вейль, Анн Рейно-Герисо, а затем приводится изложение самих лекций и последующие комментарии к ним. Они объединены пятью темами: материалистический взгляд; после открытия разума; политика и социальная теория; этика и эстетика; различные темы и планы эссе. Далее обсуждается более поздняя философская мысль Симоны Вейль, которая показывает, что ее опубликованные работы были свидетельством классического обучения и высокого интеллектуального развития. Также обнаруживаются противоречия, с которыми Симоне Вейль приходилось бороться в своем мышлении. Два основных фактора, влияющих на ее философскую мысль, — это Древняя Греция и христианство. Далее следует краткое *Заключение* и *Библиография*.

Ключевые слова: Симона Вейль, лекции, философская мысль, Древняя Греция, христианство, иудаизм

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