

## BEYOND THE PERSONAL: WEIL'S CRITIQUE OF MARITAIN\*

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Jacques Maritain and Simone Weil never met, although there was a brief exchange of letters between them. Maritain never cites Weil; she cites him explicitly in at least three places, but disparagingly. But therein hangs a tale, and one that in the telling reveals that although there never was a great exchange, and that Weil may well have been slightly vindictive, that nevertheless Maritain did play a significant role for Weil. However, it was one in which he chiefly inspired her to rise to a new level of thought by her conscious and deliberate attempt to contradict him.

### I

When Simone Weil arrived in New York in early July, 1942 with her parents as refugees, she had one plan of action fixed firmly in her mind. That was to return to the occupied portion of France, and indeed to be parachuted into it. Sometime earlier she had conceived a plan to parachute nurses into the front lines who would take care of the wounded in the heat of battle. There were, of course, very grave risks in such a venture, but taking them was at the heart of the plan. For, Weil believed, in such a war, one way that the Allies could show what they were fighting for was by risking themselves in an effort of brave self-sacrificial compassion.

It is virtually impossible to overestimate the importance of this mission to Weil. Its moral significance had captured her conscience, and she was desperate to do something for the war effort. Living in the comfort of New York, she felt like a deserter, and were she to be isolated from France much longer, she wrote, it would break her heart.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Pétrement, *La Vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), p. 627, condensed and translated by Raymond Rosenthal as *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 475. Biographical facts are taken from this source.

She wrote numerous letters to anybody who might listen to her plan and help in its implementation or help her to get somebody in authority to listen. The recipients of these letters included an Admiral Leahy and probably President Roosevelt himself. When ultimately she did reach England, only to be stuck (she thought) writing reports for the Free French and having the plan declared as mad by De Gaulle, she resigned her post with the Free French, and fell into a despair that ended only with her death from tuberculosis in August, 1943.

It was in an effort to enlist his help in this plan that Weil wrote to Maritain shortly after her arrival in New York, figuring that he might not only be sympathetic but also that he might have some influence. Maritain was out of town but did reply on August 4. Although the correspondence has yet to be published, Pétrement, who had seen it, described his reply as friendly, saying that Weil's purpose was lofty and noble, and, although he did not know if her plan was practicable, that he would try to help her meet with appropriate authorities. He also advised her to meet with Alexander Koyré, and to discuss with Father Coutourier certain questions about her "spiritual position" that she had mentioned.<sup>2</sup> It was, of course, out of her meetings with Coutourier that the well-known and controversial "Letter to a Priest" emerged.

Aside from any promise, implied or explicit, to help, this might have been the end of the exchange. It clearly was for Maritain. But it wasn't for Weil. Instead, we find Maritain twice mentioned explicitly in *The Need for Roots*. The first is when, in discussing the soul's need for truth, Weil quotes his claim that all the greatest thinkers of antiquity accepted slavery, despite the very clear evidence of Aristotle, who says that there are people who did not. Since people reading Maritain might well not have the wherewithal to do the research themselves and would have to take his word on the matter, he has offended against the need for truth and ought to be hailed in front of a tribunal which could censure him.<sup>3</sup> (This is somewhat less silly than it sounds since it is

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 627.

<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 38. Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Les droits de l'homme et le loi naturelle* (New York: Editions de la Maison Française, 1942), trans. Doris C. Anson, *The Rights of Man and the*

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simply a "for instance" of a larger and very serious point about the responsibility of writers in a society.) The second instance is when, at the end of *The Need for Roots*, she directly quotes him as saying that "the notion of right is even deeper than that of moral obligation, for God has a sovereign right over his creatures and he has no moral obligation to them."<sup>4</sup> This thought absolutely appalled her, and she cites it as an example of what she deemed "the Roman conception of God," that is, a God who is like the emperor exercising sovereignty over subjects as slaves. This is actually a very important point, as I shall argue below. Nevertheless, it also indicates lack of pleasure. Finally, if Maritain is indeed the target in the essay "La personne et le sacré," as I and others have maintained,<sup>5</sup> then he is also one of the originators of personalism who is "warmly wrapped in social consideration," one of those "writers for whom it is part of their profession to have or hope to acquire a name and reputation."<sup>6</sup> One senses more than a little rancor here.

Why the antagonism? I suspect that to the degree her aggressiveness is personal it is because Maritain ultimately did not do anything to help after his original warm letter. It may well be the case that the warm tone of the letter and its kindness when he did not help was in the end taken by Weil as condescension, the sort of encouraging politeness one receives from great people, but that ultimately is designed to get rid of us. Feeling a sense of expectation, when disappointed we feel that we have been played for fools. Maritain may not have meant this, but Weil, who was very sensitive about these sorts of things, and had a lot of experience with them as she scouted for support for her project, might very well have thought he did.

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*Natural Law* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944), p. 57. Citations are from the English translation.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 277-78; cf. Jacques Maritain, *Rights of Man*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. E. Springsted "Rootedness: Culture and Value," in D. Allen and E. Springsted, *Spirit, Nature and Community* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 178-179. Simone Fraisse, "Simone Weil, la personne et les droits de l'homme," *Cahiers Simone Weil* 7.2.

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, "Human Personality," in *Selected Essays 1934-43* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 17.

Now, if this were the sum of the exchange between Weil and Maritain, it is not entirely to Weil's credit. However, there is rather more, and it lies at a far deeper philosophical level. Indeed, it concerns the very idea of depth in human life.

## II

Weil finally reached London in November, 1942, and joined the Free French. She was given the task of examining the developing projects of the Resistance committees for the reorganization of France after the war. Her identity card states her title as "redactrice." She was bitterly disappointed on not being sent to France on a dangerous mission, and even more so as she could receive no serious hearing for her own project. Yet this was an incredibly productive time for her. Far from simply churning out the easily forgettable reports of a bureaucrat, she wrote in a period of little more than six months numerous essays on the spiritual and political renewal of France, what has come to us as the book *The Need for Roots*, as well as several other essays on politics, religion and ancient philosophy. Her thought in these works is at its most mature and most integrated. Indeed, she herself in a letter to her parents at the time suggests that her thought had taken such a turn that it had become more and more compact, more indivisible, as it grew.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most important of the works written at this time was the essay "La personne et le sacré," the first or among the first of the London works and a turning in Weil's thought. It both clears the decks of numerous ideas so easily assumed in thinking about the human being and human communities, clearly distinguishing Weil's own views, and introduces many of the great themes of the London writings, such as her notion of the "impersonal," and her argument that obligations absolutely have precedence over rights. It is above all an extremely original essay, and has a timeless quality to it, as many of her writings have.

Yet, despite this timeless quality it is also a highly contextual essay. One part of that context is, of course, the concern over just what France

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<sup>7</sup> Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 196.

should look like after the war, of how it would conceive and organize its laws, social concerns, and politics. In short, she was very concerned about how justice would be conceived, especially given all the competing voices. That much has always been recognizable and recognized. The other part of the context has not been so easily recognized, although if one looks carefully it is in fact easily recognizable. That context is Maritain's little book *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, which for Weil was perhaps the chief competing voice.

There is no doubt that Weil had read *The Rights of Man*, which was published in French in New York in 1942, and that she could put a copy in front of her. The direct quote from *The Need for Roots* cited above attributing a "Roman conception of God" to Maritain is from this book,<sup>8</sup> which is also the source for Maritain's contestable claim about how the ancients viewed slavery.<sup>9</sup> While "La Personne et le sacré" never explicitly mentions Maritain, and has no direct quote from him, there are numerous indicators that it is a direct response to *The Rights of Man*. The most incontrovertible example is a point that can only be taken from Maritain's discussion of natural law in that book. There he calls the natural law an "unwritten law" and proceeds to cite Antigone as an example of it.<sup>10</sup> Weil notes, in a way that leaves no doubt as to what she is referring to, that "it is extraordinary that Antigone's unwritten law should have been confused with the idea of natural right (*droit*)."<sup>11</sup> Since this point is not an aside or a mere "for instance," but an essential one about the status of rights in the Greeks, and part of an extended argument about rights and their linkage to the concept of "person" and "personality," an essential theme of the essay and of Maritain's book, it is immediately clear that this essay is a response to *The Rights of Man*. The connection becomes even clearer when then one reads the essay in the light of its being a response, for Weil can then be seen to be explicitly attacking a number of points that Maritain has made about rights and the concepts of "person" and "personality" in *The Rights of*

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man*, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34 and 35.

<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil, "Human Personality," p. 20.

Man. Simone Fraise, who was the first one to notice the connection, points out: "On y trouve l'éloge de la personne, à laquelle sont associés les termes que Simone Weil refusait de lui reconnaître: le sacré, le respect, l'épanouissement, le droit."<sup>12</sup> One may also add to this list Weil's discussions of the relation of the person to the collectivity, and her equally subtle but insistent differences from Maritain on the issue of human labor.<sup>13</sup>

If this is a direct response, what sort of response it is needs to be considered, however. While rather thorough in covering a number of Maritain's points, it is not exactly a systematic critique, a point by point refutation. Nor is it, despite everything else, one that is entirely unsympathetic to Maritain's project. In fact, on any number of items of concern which they both canvas they might well agree: the deep problems of both individualism and totalitarianism, and the need to

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<sup>12</sup> Simone Fraise, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-24.

<sup>13</sup> This issue is one that admirably illustrates Weil's approach to Maritain's book discussed in the next few paragraphs. Maritain spends considerable time defending the dignity of labor, and liberating it from the conditions of slavery and servitude (*The Rights of Man*, pp. 50-60). Weil would agree in the abstract. Where she disagrees is that, unlike Maritain, who thinks we ought to aim at progressive liberation from material necessity (pp. 22 and 27) and ought to subjugate nature (p. 26), she thinks that the value of labor is that it allows one to obey necessity and is an "opportunity to reach the impersonal stage of attention" ("Human Personality," p. 17). So, when Maritain outlines the rights of the working person (*The Rights of Man*, pp. 61-62), he chiefly considers issues of property, such as a just wage, ownership, insurance, and other benefits. Weil, for her part, comments: "Usually when addressing [the workers] on their conditions, the selected topic is wages; and for men burdened with a fatigue that makes any effort of attention painful it is a relief to contemplate the unproblematic clarity of figures. In this way, they forget that the subject of the bargain, which they complain they are being forced to sell cheap and for less than the just price, is nothing other than their soul. Suppose the devil were bargaining for the soul of some poor wretch and someone, moved by pity, should step in and say to the devil: 'It is a shame for you to bid so low; the commodity is worth at least twice as much'" ("Human Personality," p. 18). Here, she is contesting a general position about labor, and Maritain happens to be one who believes it.

establish the human being as ontologically related to God. For this reason, a point by point refutation would miss the mark, since it is a general approach to these problems that she is worried about. Indeed, to read it as a point by point refutation would suggest that Weil had let a rather unfair prejudice color her reading of Maritain and that she had in fact utterly misread him. Her attacks on the concepts of "person" and "personality" that she launches there are attacks on concepts of the empirical, social ego, and that is clearly *not* what Maritain thinks he is trying to get his readers to consider, and what he is trying to avoid by rooting the concept of person in a relation to God and calling it sacred. I think she understood this, and does not make him a strawman.

The response is more subtle and more pressing. Its nature is indicated in the sixth sentence of Weil's essay. In her opening lines, she makes a common sense appeal to a distinction between a sentence such as "You do not interest me," which is genuinely cruel and offensive, and one where we might say "Your person does not interest me," which, she notes, can be used in an affectionate conversation between friends. One might imagine, for example, in the latter case two friends pursuing a philosophical argument, and one musing about how amenable a position is to him. The other can, without offense, suggest that how well it fits his friend's personal preferences is irrelevant to discovering its truth, which is what they are both really interested in. Given this valid distinction, she then comments: "This proves that something is amiss with the vocabulary of the modern trend of thought known as Personalism. And in this domain, where there is a grave error of vocabulary it is almost certainly the sign of a grave error of thought."<sup>14</sup> The accusation therefore is initially not so much that Maritain has gotten hold of the wrong sort of problem or that he has failed to define his terms accurately, but that in using the term "personne" he has failed to get a hold on *le mot juste*.

That is not a trivial point, and certainly not for Weil, whose own concern for calling things by their right names was categorically imperative. The most charitable interpretation, then, of her objection is that no matter how carefully defined "personne" might be, and

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<sup>14</sup> Simone Weil, "Human Personality," p. 9.

Maritain certainly went to some efforts to define it carefully, this would simply be *recherché*, and its subtle distinctions would be lost given the normal freight that the word carries. Weil is absolutely right on this. What is heard and celebrated when one says that the person is sacred is not that "one can find alone his complete fulfillment"<sup>15</sup> in the absolute of God, which is what Maritain thinks he means. What is heard is that the confused mass of desires that constitutes our social egos and aspirations, what we normally call the person or our personality, is sacred. When that happens, the sacred is created in our image. I think, given Maritain's intellectual influence among the Free French, Weil was particularly concerned to warn them on this point.

That is the most charitable interpretation, and leaves Maritain's own thought internally intact. However, while Maritain may have been less misled by his use of the term "personne" than his audience might have been, Weil believed that nevertheless he was still misled, and seriously so. He makes exactly the sort of mistake she fears will be made when one uses the term "personne" for what is sacred in a human being. The problem is Maritain's easy connection of "personne" to the notion of rights, which Weil thinks belongs to the realm of "words of the middle region,"<sup>16</sup> the realm of ordinary institutions. Rights are a matter of commerce and property, she claims, and are defined by *jus utendi et abutendi*. That, of course, makes them quite fit to deal with issues of personality and the social ego. But when then Maritain suggests ideas such as rights having priority over obligations because God has rights over creatures and not obligations she thinks something has gone very wrong, indeed. Not only has law belonging to property and commerce been applied rather unequivocally to the divine (she is being Plotinian here), the whole sense of the proposition runs counter to the more genuine Christian understanding of God. God acts out of his goodness and love to creatures, going out from himself to meet their needs. Obligations, as she understands them, are not laid on one—and they are not laid on God. They are a response of goodness to need, a matter of heart. To talk about rights preceding obligations in

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> "Simone Weil, "Human Personality," p. 33.

the case of God is then utterly to mis-describe the nature of God's goodness and love as portrayed in the Gospel.

### III

The scope of this paper does not allow me to go much further into the substance of what may now be seen as a legitimate and important philosophical debate. I would briefly like, however, to say something more about Weil's deepest objections to personalism and about her original alternative in suggesting that what is truly sacred in the human being is the impersonal, and why she was so insistent on liberating the minds of her colleagues from Maritain's claims.

Weil has two important reasons for rejecting personalism. One is her considered view of what constitutes personality. Rather than seeing it, as Maritain did, as the highest and deepest dimension of our being, that wherein our freedom is most clearly expressed and needs most respect, in arguments similar to those of Foucault a generation later, she held that personality and its value are constituted by what she called "social matter." The person and the value we put on persons is historically contingent, and manufactured by the play of social forces. So, more often than not, when we focus on the person and personality, we tend to miss what is of genuine and lasting value in human aspiration. Moreover, since personality is born out of social struggle, there is always an element of contention involved in personality and in its expansion. As she points out quite observantly, rights, which are linked to the concept of the person, are always asserted in a tone of contention, and even inhibit movements of genuine charity.

The second related reason for rejecting personalism is that it doesn't actually protect and value humanity to the ultimate degree that it thinks it does, no matter how many rights are defined and how clearly. Even when one's rights are scrupulously guarded, Weil thought, one's deepest inner cries are not necessarily heard or responded to. Those lie behind easily defined words, and until one can hear the inarticulate word behind the words, one has not heard the human or what is sacred in her at all. Weil bases this claim in her own watching of court cases, where everything is done fairly, but somehow those who lack articulateness have a profound sense that good has not triumphed,

that they have not been heard and even that they have been humiliated by the flow of fine words.

Now, given this critique of personality, Weil's counter-assertion that what really is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him gains some plausibility and shows her own originality. For although the very word "impersonal" perhaps chills us as being unfriendly and abstract, a good part of Weil's point is that to isolate personality from the human being's striving for good, and to consider it all of her, is itself the very height of abstraction. When she recommends "impersonalism," she is therefore not trying to cut humans out of the world, but to make room for them. She is doing so by refusing to take aspects of the human striving for good that are essentially bound up with contingent historical circumstances to be the whole of humans. The human expectation for good is more than what counts as personality, and we are obliged to respect humans even when they show no signs of being persons (no matter what Peter Singer thinks). As she points out in another essay, the man laid upon by thieves and lying by the side of the road had become nothing more important than a stone; it is no wonder that the priest and the Levite walked by him. Yet the Samaritan somehow didn't let that limit him, nor did he let his Samaritanishness or the man's Jewishness limit him, either. So "impersonality" is meant to stand behind a stronger moral claim than can be generated from the notions of personality and rights.

The impersonal is for Weil absolutely prior to any individual aspects of the human. Now that wounds our vanity, for we like to think what we have made of ourselves is really important. But in the end the impersonal may alone be that which sustains our infinite love and concern—and what in us allows us to transcend our own personal aspirations in order to care for another. I refer here to a point made by Stanley Cavell. Cavell, in discussing Wittgenstein's dismissal of private languages, notes that often people object to that dismissal because they think that by taking away the privacy of, say, the way they want to talk about pain sensations, something important about our inner life is also taken away. He goes on to say:

In a way this is true. I think one moral of the *Investigations* as a whole can be drawn as follows: The fact, and the state, of your

(inner) life cannot take its importance from anything special in it. However far you have gone with it, you will find that what is common is there before you are. The state of your life may be, and may be all that is, worth your infinite interest. But then that can only exist along with a complete disinterest toward it. The soul is impersonal.<sup>17</sup>

What both Weil and Cavell seem to be saying is that if we are wholly and infinitely committed to making space for human souls in the world, it cannot be because of their interesting-or our interested-features. The commitment must be farther reaching than that. It must transcend the world of the personal, and be impersonal. For that is where the soul of the true lover and beloved dwells. It is not Maritain's point at all, I think. But I do think he in some way was responsible for Weil coming to it.

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<sup>17</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 361.