
The Measure of Justice: The Language of Limit as Key to Simone Weil's Political Philosophy

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For evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited.

– Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*

[F]or man, in so far as he is a natural being, keeping within limits is justice.

– Simone Weil, “The Pythagorean Doctrine”

One of the pillars of modern liberalism is its assertion of the radical autonomy of the human subject. Within modernity, all of nature, both human and non-human, comes to be understood in relation to that essential freedom and it follows, then, that any limits to the exercise of freedom must, themselves, be freely postulated by an autonomous will. Such limits are, in the final analysis, seldom more than a matter of convenience or the terms of a contract between competing interests. Because freedom is seen as an absolute and self-evident good it becomes increasingly impossible to speak publicly of *goods* which may transcend, or circumscribe or limit that freedom. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor writes: “The notion of self-determining freedom, pushed to its limit, doesn’t recognize any boundaries, anything given that I have to respect in my exercise of self-determining choice” (1991, 68).

Freedom as the essence of being can be seen as the dominant idea in modern Western thought. It finds perhaps its fullest expression in

the dynamism of our technology. The troubling aspect of this assertion of freedom is that it presupposes an ontology which excludes any idea of justice as an overarching claim. Another Canadian philosopher, George Grant, observed: "It is often said these days that the task of thinkers is to reclaim the possibility of ontology, which has been lost in the realization of technology.... But the difficulty of this position is that modern thought at its height does not deny ontology; rather it asserts an ontology which excludes what is essential about justice. It is not ontology per se which is the heart of our task as thinkers; rather, it is the search for *an ontology which carries in itself the essence of justice*" (Grant 1998, 441, our emphasis).

It was Simone Weil's merit as a modern philosopher that she undertook this task; at the heart of her search was the conviction that "limitation is the law of the manifested world" (Weil 1968, 79). This is a principle which Weil derived from the cosmologies of Presocratic thinkers like Anaximander and Philolaus. According to Anaximander, an Ionian of the 6th century B.C.E., all things emerge out the *apeiron*, or "unlimited," and assume form precisely in being subjected to limit. This cosmology sets the stage for the ontology of limit later developed within the Pythagorean school for whom limit, or limitation, appears as an active principle. According to John Burnet, it is with the Pythagoreans that "we have the theory that what gives form to the unlimited is the limit." The development of this principle "is the great contribution of Pythagoras to philosophy" (Burnet 1964, 35). Indeed the Pythagorean principle of limit established the basis for the much more elaborate Platonic conception of form. It also had profound implications for Simone Weil's political and moral philosophy.

To Weil, seeing things in the world *as they are* involves discerning this principle of limit within nature, within other human beings, and within ourselves. Like Socrates, she believed that the failure to see the true nature of things constituted a kind of madness and, conversely, that seeing things properly was the essence of virtue. It follows that a proper conception of limit, as the very principle of order in "the manifested world," is the precondition for a right understanding of justice, beauty, truth, and the good.

The endeavour to derive insights for moral and political philosophy from a “law of the manifested world” is a distinctly un-modern project. And Weil is, in many respects, un-modern in her thinking. But she is not a reactionary. Evidently, Weil felt the need to propose this ancient principle as a foundation because she had discerned the inadequacy of all current ones. Her principle of limit implies an ontology which is incompatible with the one presupposed by the modern account of “unlimited freedom.” It thus establishes the basis of a critique of Western modernity that goes right to the roots. Where she begins by saying “limitation is the law of the manifested world,” she concludes that, “for man...keeping within limits is justice” (Weil 1957a, 185). In this article we will attempt to understand how Weil moves from the former of these two affirmations to the latter.

For Weil, the most important element of the Pythagorean account of form-as-limit was the idea of limitation as an active creative principle. She writes: “The Pythagoreans said, not the union of the limited and the limitless, but what is much more beautiful: the union of that which limits and the non-limited. That which limits is God. God who says to the sea: Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further...” (1957b, 100). From this account of the nature of being, Weil draws a series of remarkable conclusions:

That which is unlimited has no existence except in receiving a limit from outside. All that exists here below is similarly constituted; not only all material realities but all the psychological realities in ourselves and in others as well. So in this world there are none but finite joys and sorrows. The infinite joys and sorrows which we think of as existing in this world, and which furthermore we necessarily situate in the future, are absolutely imaginary. The desire for infinite good which dwells at every moment in all men, even the most degraded, has its objective outside this world, and the privation of this good is the only ill not subject to limitation. To place the knowledge of this truth at the centre of the soul, in a manner whereby all the movements of the soul are ordered in relation to it, is to imitate the order of the world. For thus the content of the soul is unlimited, that is to say, absolutely all that is contained in the natural part receives a limit imprinted from outside by God present within the soul (Weil 1957b, 100–1).

We thus have here an ontology which, to use Grant's words, "carries in itself the essence of justice." It stands in marked contrast to the one which issues in the modern account of freedom. All of reality is herein understood as a manifestation of an underlying principle of order, an order reflected in the human soul as in the material world. Justice consists in a particular kind of relationship to that order. The essential characteristic of that relationship is the faculty of "consent." As with the Pythagoreans, for whom "evil belongs to the class of the unlimited," so for Weil, injustice consists in "disregarding limits." To be sure, limitation is not nullified in being disregarded; it is after all the "condition of existence of corporeal and thinking beings" (Weil 1956, 452), but human beings are nonetheless prone to "infinite illusion" with regard to that fact. "God has given us the faculty of infinite illusion," Weil writes, "so that we should have the power to renounce it out of love" (1973, 214). In *consenting to what is* human beings come to recognize themselves as integral parts of that order which is subject to limit. Weil refers to the Stoic principle of *amor fati* as an expression of this consent. But the idea of *consent to what is* also raises some difficulties. To put it directly, how does one logically maintain that justice consists of a *consent to what is* in a world where there is so much evil? Any attempt to ground an account of justice in an ontological principle stands or falls over its ability to negotiate this impasse.

The imperative of consent, even to the "inflexible mechanism of necessity" (1957b, 97), stands at the centre of Weil's thought but alongside it is this paradox: "Necessity shares...in justice. And yet in a sense it is the contrary of justice" (1957a, 189). Nowhere is this paradox more painfully apparent for Weil than in her engagement with the suffering of others. Here her ideas about consent were most profoundly tested. Weil writes, "contact with the affliction of other people...causes me such atrocious pain and so utterly rends my soul that as a result the love of God becomes almost impossible for me for a while" (1951, 91).

Weil never resolves this problem; indeed, like the writer of Job, she admits it to be, in human terms, insoluble. She does, however, think it is possible for human beings to live with this paradox without

denying either the truth of necessity or the truth of good. Her extraordinary account of *beauty* enables her to make this claim. Everything which exists, she observes, is, “by the chains of necessity subordinated to limit,” but “the very enslavement, which is necessity, or law, upon the plane of the intelligence, is beauty upon the plane immediately above, and is obedience in relation to God” (1957b, 101). For Weil, beauty made it possible for human beings to recognize and accept the reality of the world, and to love it. The recognition of the beautiful implies love, “love which consists of loving simply that a thing should be, not wanting to tamper with it...” (1956, 542). Beauty confronts us with something to which we can ascribe no scrutable purpose; which, in fact, may even cause us to suffer, but which we nevertheless know to be *good*. This encounter calls forth *consent to what is*. In Weil’s words, “it is the beauty of the world which permits us to contemplate and to love necessity” (1957a, 190).

Weil sees in the *Iliad* an exemplary model of the way in which an artist, through a supreme act of attention, can bestow upon the world, even in its misery and violence, a sense both of beauty and of reality. For Weil, the moral value of this turning toward reality lies in its capacity to free us from the grip of illusion. Having contemplated the evils of Stalinism and National Socialism, Weil observed that illusion—particularly in the form of political ideology—functioned to obscure the reality of limit and thus was the very principle of evil. On the other hand, the virtue of great art, that of a Homer or a Shakespeare, lies in its capacity to undermine the principle of illusion by drawing our attention to the paradox of beauty and necessity.

Flannery O’Connor, a contemporary artist whose vision corresponded in many respects to Weil’s account of beauty and art, once wrote: “the novelist writes about what he sees on the surface, but his angle of vision is such that he begins to see before he gets to the surface and he continues to see after he has gone past it. He begins to see in the depths of himself, and it seems to me that his position there rests on what must certainly be the bedrock of all human experience—the experience of limitation...” (O’Connor 1969, 131–32). One of O’Connor’s most remarkable stories is entitled “A View of the Woods.” Among other things the story is a kind of allegory of the

great modern progressive society. It opens with the two main characters, Mr. Fortune and his grand-daughter Mary, sitting on the hood of a Cadillac watching while a “machine systematically ate a square red hole in what had once been a cow pasture.” In the story’s first line of dialogue, Mr. Fortune says to Mary, “any fool that would let a cow pasture interfere with progress is not on my books” (O’Connor 1956, 54–55). As the story unfolds we see that Mr. Fortune’s own daughter and her “idiot” husband are indeed among those who are “not on his books.” Mr. Fortune owns the land his daughter’s family lives on and he slowly parcels it out for development. He prides himself on his vision of progress and the story depicts, time and again, his ability to dismiss the protests and laments of his own family simply by going over, in his head, his grand idea of the future. This idea drives him onward, “carrying him to some inevitable destination.” The story itself grinds forward to its horrible conclusion with the ruthless logic of a Sophoclean tragedy. But at the point when we begin to sense the full dimensions of the darkness rushing in like flood waters, there is an extraordinary moment of stillness. Mr. Fortune sitting alone in his room goes back and forth to the window. The third time at the window, “the old man stared for some time, as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before” (74).

This moment is rather like those in the *Iliad* which Weil describes as moments of grace. It is a fleeting moment of recognition; in terms of the plot, it changes nothing. It would be a gross understatement to say that this story does not end happily, but the “uncomfortable mystery” is nevertheless established as part of the truth of the story. In the experience of mystery we discover that we are limited; we discover that we do not belong to ourselves. According to one’s perspective, this realization may be a source of raging frustration or sublime wisdom. This is intimated in O’Connor’s observation that “limitation and possibility mean about the same thing” (Wallace 1987, 7).

In the perception of beauty, in the contemplation of nature or great art, we see that the concordance of necessity and good exists on another plane from the one in which we know them to be contraries.

Because Weil was so deeply sensitive to the reality of human suffering, she could not tolerate any confusion of these planes. She writes, "each phenomenon has two causes, of which one is its cause according to nature, that is, natural law; the second cause is in the providential ordering of the world, and it is never permissible to make use of one as an explanation upon the plane to which the other belongs" (1957b, 97). The beautiful, then, in revealing the full dimension of the paradox that is the relation of necessity and good, represents a mysterious "union of contraries" (Weil 1963, 135).

"Creation," Weil observes, "is matter brought into order by God, and this ordering action of God consists in imposing limits" (1957a, 168). In consenting to limit we consent to God. But as we do not encounter God directly in the world, it follows that our consent must be directed toward something mediate. Beauty, representing the mysterious "union of contraries," brings us to the threshold of consent. As such it is a sacrament, a *mediation* between the human and the divine.

Likewise, Weil speaks of the love of one's neighbour as a sacrament. It is a form of what she calls "the implicit love of God" because in the human encounter there is something going on, as it were, on another plane. In the encounter with *the other* one also encounters a limit and, in consenting to the limit, as such, one consents to "that which imposes limits." Weil repeatedly uses the term "supernatural" when she refers to justice in human relations. This is because the consent to limit, which is the condition of justice, involves a certain dispensation from the natural order. According to the natural order, "the justice of a matter is examined only if there is equal necessity on both sides. Contrarily, if one is strong and the other weak, what is possible is accomplished by the first and accepted by the second" (1957a, 174). Where there is not "equal necessity on both sides" there is no need to consider the other as any kind of limit. It is important to note that, for Weil, necessity reigns not just over inert matter but also within the "psychological realities" of the human being. The assertion of the self, bound up as it is in a web of illusion, must necessarily manifest itself as a denial of reality and, in particular, of the full existence of the other. Justice, however, is not possible

where a human being continues to see herself as the centre of the universe, for such an illusion of perspective blinds one to the recognition of limits. So justice must have its ground outside the world, in that order of reality which appears to us as an “uncomfortable mystery.”

The failure to grasp the essential nature of limit in the order of reality results from an improper *reading* of the world. Such an improper reading is what lies behind human injustice. Conversely a proper reading binds one to a deeper moral principle which Weil speaks of in terms of obedience. In her *Notebooks* Weil made the following entry: “Reading. Just as in a piece of bread we read something to eat, and we set about eating it; so in such and such a group of circumstances we read an obligation; and we set about performing it” (1956, 1:249). Weil, as a Platonist, associated the proper perception of reality with virtue. To perceive reality and to consent to it involves a sense of the real relationship of things. It involves being transported out of the basic animal narcissism which seeks to affirm its own powers by denying otherness.

There is, however, in addition to natural narcissism, another mechanism which militates against “the union of contraries.” This one functions on the political level. It is that matrix of illusion, ideology, power-struggle, oppression, and myth which so often constitutes the mechanism of social life. In her contemplation of the political Weil seemed to arrive at a theoretical and spiritual impasse: the human heart perpetually yearns for justice while in the social world necessity reigns supreme. With a series of mystical experiences at Assisi and Solesmes she began to find a way through this impasse toward a doctrine of grace. But the consent which issues in the openness of the soul to grace cannot come about without taking the full measure of evil in the world. As Weil wrote, “only he who knows the empire of might and knows how not to respect it is capable of love and justice” (1957c, 53). The empire of might stands most firmly as an obstacle to the full recognition of the existence of the other. The network of distortions, lies, and illusions constituting the empire of might militates, on the level of politics, against consent, against “the union of contraries.”

The very nature of human will is to assert itself wherever possible; the strong do as they will and the weak suffer what they must. In social and political terms, the weak, the poor, the marginal, for all intents and purposes, cease to exist as persons. Weil observes, "he who has absolutely no belongings of any kind around which social consideration crystallizes does not exist." To be non-existent in this sense means to be absolutely disregarded, to suffer in silence. Nothing less than supernatural justice can bestow upon such people the sense of their own humanity. "Supernatural justice, supernatural friendship or love," Weil writes, "are found to be implicit in all human relationships where, without there being an equality of force or of need, there is a search for mutual consent...." This "search for mutual consent" is so outside the normal range of human impulses that it can only be understood as "an imitation of the incomprehensible charity which persuades God to allow us our autonomy" (1957a, 177).

Consent to the being of the other is, as we have seen, a form of mediated consent to limit; it is also an imitation of the kenosis of God and is thus an act of renunciation. (The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, speaking of the effort to see things in the world as they are, observes, "Not till it is held in your renouncing is it truly there" [Rilke 1995, 173]. This, in a sense, captures Weil's point.) Throughout her writing, she uses the language of *attention* which always implies consent to limit; we are called, through attention, to renounce, to give ourselves away: "The attention is creative. But at the moment when it is engaged it is renunciation.... It is not surprising that a man who has bread should give a piece to someone who is starving. What is surprising is that he should be capable of doing so with so different a gesture from that with which we buy an object. Almsgiving when it is not supernatural is like a sort of purchase. It buys the sufferer" (Weil 1973, 147).

Attention, rather than "buying the sufferer," consents to her autonomy. This presupposes denial of oneself: "By denying oneself, one becomes capable under God of establishing someone else by a creative affirmation.... One gives oneself in ransom for the other.... It is a redemptive act" (Weil 1973, 148). Attention bestows reality on the other, or rather, through our act of attention, God bestows full-

ness of being even where the social reality denies it. In Weil's words, "only God present in us can really think the human quality into the victims of affliction, can really look at them with a look differing from that which we give to things, can listen to their voice as we listen to spoken words. Then they become aware that they have a voice...." It is perhaps in this sense that St. Bernard said, "love knows no rank, for it either finds equals or makes equals." Where what commonly passes for charity so often robs its recipient of dignity, this "supernatural" justice actually re-establishes it in its truest form. Accordingly, "though it finds no name for him, wherever the afflicted are loved for themselves, it is God who is present" (Weil 1973, 150).

We find in Weil's writings an account of justice which pertains not to the way in which people orient their will or predispose themselves to act toward each other, but, first and foremost, to how they see the other, and how they see themselves in relation to the other. If people see a world with themselves at the centre, they will not see what is at stake in their relations with others; they will not see limits. This is why, for Weil, the language of modern political and moral theory was ultimately inadequate: it was grounded in the language of the will. The basic assumption of modern liberal thought is that each individual seeks, by calculation and contrivance, to extend his own claim, to realize his own narrow interests, to self-actualize. This language gives rise to the illusion of being without limits.

In the society in which we are living, "the rattle of everything that leads to the future" is more deafening and frenetic than ever. It constitutes for us the very matrix of myth and illusion which, for the heroes of the *Iliad*, took the form of the self-perpetuating violence of war. Accordingly, it is a principle of limitlessness which blinds us to the true nature of reality. There is a sense of vertigo in the pace of technological development, expanding markets, the proliferation of new forms of media and advertisement. As Ernest Becker in his *Escape from Evil* observes, "modern man, in his one-dimensional economics, is driven by the lie of his life, by his denial of limitation, of the true state of natural affairs" (1975, 89).

But running counter to the force of these illusions we also have what George Grant called "intimations of deprivation" (1969, 139).

These may take the form of traditions and narratives which contain within themselves accounts of justice which are *not* subject to “the rattle of everything that leads to the future.” Or they may occur amidst those experiences of otherness in which an unconditional claim is made on us. These “moments of grace” seem to find no expression in the language of our public life, and yet, for most of us, at some point in our lives, their reality and importance cannot be denied. To Weil, the force of illusion in social life, particularly in advanced industrial societies, manifests itself precisely in the inadequacy of our language to convey such truths. In her essay “Human Personality” Weil writes: “many indispensable truths, which could save men, go unspoken for reasons of this kind; those who could utter them cannot formulate them and those who could formulate them cannot utter them.” She concludes, “If politics were taken seriously, finding a remedy for this would be one of its more urgent problems” (1986a, 84).

Weil thought that the language of “rights” was a prime example of the inadequacy of modern liberal discourse. Liberal theory, particularly in its Lockean form, starts from the conception of a person essentially as an autonomous property holder. Weil felt the language of “rights” corresponded to this conception. “The notion of rights” she contends, “is linked with the notion of sharing out, of exchange, of measured quantity. It has a commercial flavour, essentially evocative of legal claims and arguments” (1986a, 81). Weil argues that the notion of rights, the emergence of which she associates with the French Revolution, is “intrinsically inadequate.” The real problem, for her, with the notion of rights is that it does not capture the sense in which a human being is both limited and limit. As a precondition of any kind of political justice, limits must be observed within the social world. Weil writes, “any imaginary extension of these limits is seductive, so there is a seduction in whatever helps us to forget the reality of these obstacles” (72). The language of rights ultimately obliges this human desire to obscure the truth of limit.

In contrast to the idea of right which is so central to all modern political thought is Weil’s idea of *obligation*. Obligation as a principle in human relationship, and in the larger social world, is grounded “in

a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties" (Weil 1986b, 221). The human longing for good which is "never appeased by any object in this world" corresponds to this transcendent reality. Central to Weil's critique of rights is the observation that "rights are always found to be related to certain conditions," whereas, "obligations alone remain independent of all conditions" (1952, 4).

Weil's language of obligation unearths two different aspects of the human experience for which modern political and moral philosophy has no words. The first is the experience of injustice as something more than just the thwarting of one's will, or the disregarding of one's legitimate claims, but as something akin to a "sacrilege"; the second is the sense of being bound unconditionally to another in a way which is not simply to be understood in terms of utility. Both of these experiences represent dimensions of the "uncomfortable mystery." They direct our attention to the truth of limit.

The language of rights emerged from the liberal assumption that the essence of a human being is her/his freedom. Weil's language of obligation, on the other hand, is founded upon an ontology of limit from which it may be deduced that it is in fact a higher "good" for human beings to know that they are limited. This knowledge directs their attention toward their ultimate end. The recognition of the other as a limit to the claims of the self is accordingly a condition of the realization of life's highest purposes. The poverty of liberalism is evidenced in its failure to address these concerns.

The beauty, amidst the hardship, of being unconditionally claimed by something outside of ourselves—caring for someone who is dying, parenting a disabled child—is, in public terms, inarticulate. In the same way, we have a profoundly diminished language of responsibility. Because we do not have words with which to speak publicly of these "goods," neither can we speak of our failings with regard to them. With the concepts of *limit* and *obligation* Weil invokes a new language of public life—one which expresses, in the clearest terms, an account of justice which goes far beyond that of modern humanism because it contains within it an answer to the question: To what end?

It is the task of language, art, religion, a certain kind of science, and an inspired politics to draw attention, in public terms, to this deeper level of concern. Because good, beauty, and truth are given only in “lightning flashes...moments of pure intuition” (Weil 1963, 11), a public language of good becomes crucial for us though we may often fail to notice its absence.

In Weil’s writing politics is thus a double-edged sword. On the one hand it represents the everpresent danger of blinding ideology and illusion, the obscuring of limit. But on the other hand politics is the art of preserving, through meaningful language, a connection to conceptions of good and justice. Weil uses, as an analogy, the art of the poet. Politics, like poetry, is an art requiring concentration and receptivity: “In order to write verse that contains some beauty, one must have had the ambition to equal by the arrangement of words that pure and divine beauty which, according to Plato, lies on the other side of the skies” (1952, 208). Weil asserts the principle that a person, striving to be virtuous, cannot succeed by struggling to be less imperfect, but only by being attentive to the idea of perfection. Accordingly, a society does not move closer to justice when its attention is directed toward anything less than perfect justice.

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