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Simone Weil, *La personne et le sacré: collectivité, personne, impersonnel, droit, justice*. Paris: Éditions Allia, 2018. 80 pp. €3.10 (pb). ISBN 979-10-304-0797-6.

Review by Scott B. Ritner, Temple University.

As World War II dragged on, the Final Solution already underway in Nazi concentration camps, a frail, bespectacled radical philosophy teacher made her way from New York to London. Simone Weil left parents and a soon-to-be-famous mathematician brother along with his growing family behind as refugees in the United States to get as close to the active resistance in France as possible. Arriving in London in January 1943, Weil died just eight months later on August 24 of the same year. During that time, she spent a great deal of effort petitioning the Free French Forces under De Gaulle to support two different missions: the first, the development of a corps of frontline nurses who would provide both medical and spiritual support to the Resistance, and the second, a suicide mission to assassinate Hitler. Instead, she was given the task of addressing the trade union problem for the post-war reconstruction of France. That assignment became Weil's second magnum opus, *L'enracinement*. Along with that monograph, Weil wrote three of her most lasting essays elaborating on political themes in *L'enracinement*. These included *Sur la suppression générale des partis politiques*, the *Étude pour une déclaration des obligations envers l'être humain*, and *La personne et le sacré*. Each of these works was dedicated to a specific element of the larger work. The "Political Parties" piece focused on the questions of formal institutions and the truth that could or could not be carried by sloganeering. The "Draft statement" was dedicated to the question of obligation between humans and their neighbors, and *La personne et le sacré* to the issues of legal personhood, the human, the impersonal soul, and human suffering.

While each of these texts is essential reading for any scholar of Simone Weil's thought, and in the view of the reviewer, a wider audience as well, it is *La personne et le sacré* that has become the most famous, at least in the English-speaking world. Moreover, considered in light of the political destruction of truth in the early twenty-first century, *La personne et le sacré*, has, perhaps, the most immediate contemporary relevance in this time of pandemic and social/physical distancing. When death and illness are at the door of each and every human being on earth, when governments and corporations, as well as individuals, are forced to make decisions that pit individual lives and community spread of a disease against political and economic power, the question of the intrinsic value of a human being—what is sacred in us—is certainly at the front of many minds. Though much of the language of the essay is mystical, it seems that Simone Weil finally came to a nuanced answer to the famous interaction with Simone de Beauvoir when they were in their 20s.

The relationship between *La personne et le sacré* is a material one. That is not to say that the questions around whether or not it is possible to have obligation toward neighbors or an analysis of the impossibility that binds politicians from speaking the truth are not of value, but that the questions of "What is sacred in every human being?" (as the eminent Weil scholar and co-founder of the American Weil Society, Eric Springsted, has translated the title), and what is the purpose and value of suffering, are at the front of our minds during this time of disease, mass death, and coming climate catastrophe. [1]

Though *La personne et le sacré* was conceived as a response to the personalist school of political philosophy and its leader Jacques Maritain, this was not the first time that Weil had set sights on problems of the individual, the soul, the collectivity, decreation, and obligation. Weil's "thing with a soul" that took center stage in her 1939 essay on "*L'Iliad, ou le poème de la force*" has all the outward and inward properties of a human being. And, in modernity, this character has all of the legal and human rights of legal and possessive personhood. This "human personality" (as *La personne et le sacré* is best known in English) is a necessary part of the thing that has been subjected by violence. In this remarkable essay, Weil presents the problem of the thing with a soul when seen from the perspective of the "personality" that is left when the sacred center of the human being has been afflicted by might or by right.

When Weil proposes that "La pensée répugne à penser le malheur autant que la chair vivante répugne la mort" (p. 42), what is being asked of readers is that they take up the task of thinking *le malheur*, of thinking affliction not only in relation to its existence but to the human propensity to visit it onto others and to organize for its eradication. This affliction has been repeatedly cast, since Locke at the very least, as a personal failing. The hegemony of the so-called Protestant ethic in Northern Europe and Anglo-American spaces has made it even more pernicious.

In *La personne et le sacré* Weil takes care to unmask *le malheur* as a legacy of the modern age. Though it is not particular to capitalist social relations, and has existed even before the advent of feudalism, the genealogy presented in the essay begins with "la notion de droit, lancée à travers le monde en 1789, a été, par son insuffisance interne, impuissante à exercer la fonction qu'on lui confiant" (p. 9), because this is the moment of affliction's coming into conflict with the rights-holding person. The problem of the notion of rights—and this is essential to Weil's explicit and implicit critique of Jacques Maritain and his "personalist" philosophy—is drawn from a Marxist background. For Weil as for Marx, any rights claim is a claim against another. As Weil eloquently puts it, "la notion de droit, mise au centre des conflits sociaux, y rend impossible de part et d'autre toute nuance de charité" (p. 37). In short, the concept of legal right, which is the backbone of legal personhood, and by extension Maritain's philosophy, is limited by its insufficient solidarity with those who did not have the right to have rights. (It is worth noting that Hannah Arendt began an exploration of this very topic in New York in 1943 with her essay "We Refugees." [2])

It is in this essay, with the question of mystical proportions for a title, that Weil engages with a political problem both within and beyond the scope of her present catastrophe. The introduction of the concept of the impersonal as a political position relies on the dissection of the person and the soul. What is impersonal in the human being is the sacred, the good, the beautiful, the platonic idea of the human, the liberated individual. The twin purposes of the *La personne et le sacré* are expressed through the dialectical positioning of the idea of the legal, rights-holding, person and *les malheureux* who suffer not only from losing the conflict of rights claims but also seek

something beyond what personhood could prevent. These questions, for Weil, are interconnected and require a synthetic answer weaved from what many consider to be disparate intellectual traditions. And thus, her Marxist critique of rights is aligned with her Platonic critique of collectivity and her mystical critique of the secular limitation of the good.

Though the term "the great beast" does not appear in *La personne et le sacré*, Weil's concern with the communicable quality of *le malheur* comes to the fore of the essay, just as it is the beating heart of *L'enracinement*. Weil's critique of the collectivity and subsequent linking of it to the question of idolatry (p. 21, p. 23) is tantamount to privileging the individual idea and the individual capacity for comprehending or pursuing the good in a classically Platonic fashion. This is Platonic in the sense that it both regards public opinion as being malfeasant and capable of spreading untruth, as well as understanding the organizational capacity of the collectivity, that is the State, as being both personal and not at the same time. The formal collectivity, then, becomes the arbiter of what is personal (who has the right to have rights) and also makes itself into a false idol by demanding recognition of something it is not—that is a person—while being the enemy of the impersonal good and beautiful.

In terms of the mystical foundation of *La personne et le sacré*, Weil's linguistic choice of the term *malheur* and the asceticism and orientation toward God seem to be demanded of the impersonality of grace: "Seule l'opération surnaturelle de la grâce fait passer une âme à travers son propre anéantissement jusqu'au lieu où se cueille l'espèce d'attention qui seule permet d'être attentif à la vérité et au malheur. C'est la même pour les deux objets. C'est une attention intense, pure, sans mobile, gratuite, généreuse. Et cette attention est amour" (p. 57). This attentive grace demands a purification process of attenders going through affliction themselves. That it is enacted in love, supernatural love for that matter, is a testament to the power of Weil's own love of neighbor, which is the same as the love of God.

What links these three otherwise paradoxical modalities of thought in Weil's essay is the concept of justice. Those who suffer, like the young girl being forced into a brothel, do not speak of rights (pp. 37-38), as is the heritage of Rome (pp. 32-33), but of something Greek instead. This Greek idea is justice. Weil explicates this in part through the interactions of Antigone and Creon (p. 35) and in part through her description of the condition of *les malheureux*. This class of humans, who have been denied personhood, has been legally and politically silenced. This empowers those who have power over personhood to interpret their words, and these words are twisted and turned against the inarticulate, against the stammerer, against the oppressed: "Le malheur est par lui-même inarticulé. Les malheureux supplient silencieusement qu'on leur fournisse des mots pour s'exprimer. Il y a des époques où on leur fournit des mots, mais mal choisis, car ceux qui les choisissent sont étrangers au malheur qu'ils interprètent" (p. 41).

It is these figures, the historically oppressed, the materially violated beyond physical pain, the humiliated and disenfranchised, who are closer to the sacred than the eyeless man's personality. This man-made blind has not had his person touched at all, nor his soul, but the sacred part of him has been altered along with his body (pp. 8-10). To make someone blind or to make someone inarticulate, as is the case of the historically oppressed and the humiliated (p. 41), is to affect them beyond their person. It is an attempt to destroy the good in them, the sacred in them (p. 10).

Weil, however, does not stop with this powerful explanation of the silence of the historically, politically, legally, morally, and otherwise oppressed. *La personne et le sacré* turns toward the

question of how to address this catastrophic situation. The historical context for this cannot be ignored. Weil, a refugee from and participant in the resistance to the fascist death machine, describes in *L'enracinement* how the French had opened themselves to this hazardous situation. In *La personne et le sacré*, Weil digs deeply into the sandy soil from which France was deracinated. The hope in this pessimistic essay is to dig deeply enough that it will find fertile soil for the idea of justice to grow up and replace the claims and counter-claims of rights. Weil's idiosyncratic combination of Plato and Marx is combined with her idiosyncratic mysticism. This synthesis produces a dramatic and pessimistic reading of the limits of political and moral action in the face of oppression.

Weil transitions to this by shifting from the narrow political analysis of coercive force and class violence to the broader political and theological questions that she presents by writing "Le bien est la seule source du sacré. Il n'y a de sacré que le bien et ce qui est relatif au bien" (p. 10). Yet this expansion is where Weil's masterful essay finds itself in aporia. On the one hand, communal and social attributes such as affliction, truth, beauty, justice, the good, and the sacred, are all "impersonal." On the other hand, rights and privileges are personal and individual. Still, for Weil, collectivity is an ersatz substitution for the impersonal to such an extent that she declares that it is idolatrous, and she damns the metaphor of the body politic in due course (p. 21, p. 23). The only way to the impersonal good and the impersonal sacred is through the material and collective experience of *malheur*. In fact, she argues explicitly that it is a struggle, by means of force, that the human may shed the suppressive might of the collectivity and find some small contact with the impersonal, leaving only their "fragiles possibilités" (p. 25) embodied.

This leaving behind is what Weil calls, in other writings, decreation. Decreation is not an act of depersonalizing, of anachronistically becoming impersonal, so much as it is a straining against the aporia of the rights-holding individual oppressed by a collectivity that offers it nothing but the right to obey. "On accuse l'Allemagne moderne de la mépriser. Mais elle s'en est servie à satiété dans ses revendications de nation prolétaire. Elle ne reconnaît, il est vrai, à ceux qu'elle subjugue d'autre droit que celui d'obéir. La Rome antique aussi" (pp. 33-34). The historical context of "modern" Germany, by which Weil means Nazi Germany, which is accused of hating rights, even in its proletarian attempts to demand them (in 1919 and 1923), has actually given rise to the Roman origin of the idea of rights, long before the liberatory ideas of 1789, that the original right of Rome was the right to obey, the right to be dominated by the powerful. This obedience, then, provides the person/thing with little to stand on. The aporia of the afflicted in society comes into full view in this moment.

On the one hand, as has already been addressed, this class of *les malheureux* is rendered inarticulate by the violence done to them. On the other hand, even if they were able to vocalize their pain, without the supernatural and impersonal grace of attention, it is more than likely that none can hear them. This is especially true for the powerful, who can only hear the person and not the human being, who can only hear what is addressed to them in their own language. "Rien n'est plus affreux par exemple que de voir en correctionnelle un malheureux balbutier devant un magistrat qui fait en langage élégant de fines plaisanteries" (p. 13). This failing is not only one that is common among the powerful, though it is. It is a failing that Weil seeks to correct in her own life and in the lives of all of us. The only way, though it is incomplete, to the possibility of a better world is to begin by finding the impersonal attention in ourselves to the impersonal suffering in our fellow *malheureux*.

One may ask, why do we need a pocket-sized copy of an essay in moral and political theory? If we choose to keep this book in a back pocket or toss it in a daily bag, it will always be there for further edification. If we keep an essay of this sort close to our heart (in a breast pocket or the interior pocket of a winter coat), we may always have a handy guide for ruminations on the pressing questions of the day. Enter Éditions Allia, who published a beautifully bound, pocket-sized edition of *La personne et le sacré* in 2018. To keep such a text close to body and mind would be to keep in the forefront of our political, moral, and religious concerns the condition and fate of those forced to suffer in a violent society.

NOTES

[1] Simone Weil, "What is Sacred in Every Human Being?" in *Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt, 103-131 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

[2] Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," *The Menorah Journal* XXXI (January 1943), 69-77.

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