

Simone Weil On War

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Life Of Simone Weil

Simone Weil was born in France in 1909 and died in London in 1943. Her parents were from a Jewish background but were not practising Jews, and they raised their children without religion. Young Simone was very intelligent, a brilliant student with a strong sympathy for the poor and the oppressed. She was involved in various radical left wing movements from a young age but she was always a fiercely independent thinker, one who would never simply toe a particular party line. After university she taught philosophy in secondary schools, she worked in factories for a time, she spent a short time as a member of an anarchist brigade in the Spanish civil war. Also around this time she began to have what could be called mystical experiences, and increasingly she found herself drawn to questions of religion or spirituality, though she always remained outside any organised church. With the arrival of the Germans in 1940 she left Paris – very reluctantly – and later France, finally making her way to London where she worked for the Free French. Here her health, which was always poor, gave out and she died of tuberculosis and malnutrition at the age of 34, her death probably hastened by an asceticism in which she denied herself proper food and rest, and by a kind of despair over the war and the fate of her country.

Weil's Attitude Towards War

Simone Weil's attitudes towards war were complex, and probably changed along the way. Certainly the radical circles in which she moved were largely pacifist. But she did enlist in the Spanish civil war, though owing to an accident she was only there for a short time, and never actually fought. Like many she came away disillusioned, and very aware of the destructive potential of war. From then on she seemed to espouse pacifism, though probably never absolutely. She was an admirer of T.E. Lawrence, for instance. Certainly though, she argued for appeasement when Hitler's forces began to occupy Czechoslovakia – appeasement in order to avoid what she saw as the much greater horror of a European war. Later she was upset at the German occupation of France, and at what she saw as France's easy capitulation to the Germans – she had believed that France, and especially Paris, would and should have been defended. She felt that she was implicated in this failure because of her earlier pacifism and her involvement in groups that espoused pacifism. And from this time on her mind seemed to be occupied with this dilemma – of knowing only too well the dangers and the horrors of war, but also believing that not to fight in some circumstances can involve a great betrayal.

Love Of One's Country

An important part of her thought on this subject is the question of love of one's country. When she talks about love of one's country she never means by this a jingoistic pride, a concern for national glory or power or achievement. Rather, it's to do with all the fragile and precious things that nourish the souls of the people. She was always concerned with what she called the needs of the soul, needs that she regarded as every

bit as important as the needs of the body. By the “soul” in this context she’s referring to something like the psyche or the psychological being of the person. And so she writes “there is nothing in the world so precious but nothing more fragile ... as the vital warmth of a human environment, this medium that bathes and nourishes the thoughts and virtues” (in Petrement 1976: 351). She says that “no human being should be deprived ... of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, language, culture etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a *human* life is not possible” (Weil 1963: 133). So in talking about love of country, she’s talking about this environment that nurtures or feeds the soul. To be deprived of this, she believed, is “to fall into a state of spiritual lethargy resembling death” (Weil 1978: 45). For her, it seems, the beginning of love is this love of one’s own, and it is only insofar as we are grounded in such an environment, insofar as we are nurtured in this kind of love, that we are able to love what is other. Because of the warmth of this initial love, we are able to open our hearts to what she calls divine light or divine grace. And equally, such a grounding in love also enables us to open our hearts more fully to others, to regard people foreign to us, for instance, with a respect or compassion that is informed by the love that we feel for our own.

In the context of war, there are two points to make about this love of country. One is that it could be a reason or justification for going to war. Certainly it seems to have been an important factor in her belief that France should have been defended – what would be defended is this particular, fragile, living human environment. But perhaps more importantly, she thought that if people must go to war, then it should only be in this spirit, a spirit that is based in love or compassion rather than in the will to power or

glory. She talks about the different spirit that is inspired by this compassionate love of country, as opposed to the chauvinistic, power-oriented nationalism that she saw around her: such love, she says, “has a warmth about it which the sentiment of national grandeur altogether lacks. The vital current which inspires it is a perfectly pure one, and is charged with an extraordinary intensity” (Weil 1978: 164). She contrasts what she saw as the pure courage that is grounded in this kind of love, with a debased and brutal courage that springs from the will to power and destruction, and she believed that people can only fight well – that is, decently and humanely – if they are motivated by this kind of love (Weil 1978: 164; Weil quoted in Tuck McFarland and Van Ness 1987: 233). For her, the spirit in which people go to war is vitally important, and it affects both the way in which the war is fought, and the scars that result.

Problems With War

Despite what I’ve said about love of country, she still regarded war as a last resort, and as fraught with all kinds of moral hazards. And she was never naïve about this – she knew quite well that people often have little choice in the matter – they can simply find themselves caught up in a war. I’ll outline now some of her main concerns about war. Much of this is to do with the way in which war develops a momentum of its own, and is almost impossible to keep under control.

One big problem, she thought, is that people don’t know, or quickly lose sight of, what they’re fighting for. Truth, it is often said, is the first casualty of war, and Weil lists truth as more sacred than any other human need (1978: 35). Wars, she believed, are often justified with lies, or, perhaps even more, with words that when you tease them

out have no real, solid meaning. She lists some words from her time: “nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, democracy” (Weil 1977: 271). Often, she says, words like these become absolutes in a way that they never are in reality. And it is these absolutes and abstract entities that people end up fighting for (Weil 1977: 268ff). Even if people enter a war for good reason, they can quickly lose sight of this. She believed that this is what happened in the Spanish civil war, certainly among the people with whom she was involved – very quickly the real purpose of the whole struggle, and the real ideals on which it was based, were forgotten (Weil 1977: 77).

Another concern for her was the powerful sense of excitement and intoxication associated with war, and she noted the strength of this during her time in Spain – she talks of “peaceable Frenchmen who savoured that blood-polluted atmosphere with visible pleasure”, and she believed that this excitement was at times almost irresistible (Weil 1977: 76-7).

This intoxication, she thought, doesn’t last – it’s usually in the early stages, and is associated with a sense of power or glory. Once things get tougher, a different kind of momentum develops. This is what happens, for instance, when comrades have been killed, or when soldiers are constantly faced with the prospect of their own death. In her essay on Homer’s Iliad, she says,

Always, among men, the intolerable afflictions ... of war endure by force of their own weight ... a moderate and reasonable end to all [the] suffering would leave naked, and exposed to consciousness, memories of such violent affliction as could not be endured ... the thought that such vast efforts should have brought only a negative or limited profit hurts too much (Weil 1987b: 42).

So as it goes on people can't stop, because they have invested too much in it. To stop fighting, or to accept some reasonable end to the fighting can mean that, in the minds and hearts of the participants, all the suffering has been for nothing. In the end the suffering may well have been for nothing, or at least it may have far outweighed anything gained by the war, but this is a very bitter truth to face up to.

Finally – and this is a very important point in her thinking on war – Weil talks often, particularly in her essay on the Iliad, about the way in which the violence of war crushes the soul: it turns people into things, it petrifies equally but differently the souls of victor and vanquished alike (Weil 1987b: 44-45). “Whoever has had to mutilate in himself all aspiration to live,” she says, “of him an effort of heart-breaking generosity is required before he can respect the life of another” (Weil 1987b: 44). So enduring the necessity of war demands such a hardening of one's heart that it is necessarily brutalizing, and this comes out in one's actions. Soldiers in these situations have to deny or destroy so much in themselves that they become easy destroyers of others, acting not like human beings but like blind forces of nature. Weil regarded this as almost inevitably a part of war – not quite inevitably, but close. You only escape it through a kind of miracle, she says, and “miracles of this sort are rare and brief” (Weil 1987b: 46). And this is why war is so dangerous, because it becomes uncontrollable, it takes over people's hearts and souls, and it's almost inevitably brutalizing.

So What Can Protect And Sustain People In War?

In Weil's thinking, we all have the capacity, in varying degrees, to be open to and to receive what she calls supernatural light, or divine love, or divine grace. It is our openness to this light that is blocked by the hardening of our hearts or souls, by the brutalization that can result from war – so in such cases people feel like they are sunk in a terrible kind of darkness, in which anything worthy of love or respect has been destroyed by brute force. In her thinking, war at its worst is the triumph of brute force over humanity.

Weil uses the image of being in the sea, buffeted by the waves, but holding on to a rope that comes down from above (Weil 1987b: 194). In difficult times such as war, this is what people have to do. What sustains people at such times is the capacity or the opportunity to love, or to feel respect, or to experience even a tiny touch of real beauty or goodness or truth. It is as if people need these things to hold on to through all the ugliness, and it is this that can prevent that closing or hardening of our hearts, that brutalizing effect of war. And it is up to those people who are aware of such needs to try to preserve and maintain an environment in which such needs can be met.

The Needs Of The Soul In War

In thinking about how a soldier, or anyone, can survive these effects of war, or how a war can be fought in such a way that some kind of humanity is preserved, if that is even possible, then we are really considering Weil's idea of the needs of the soul. In one essay she briefly outlines the needs of the soul, and then says, "If this is the good, then modern societies, even democratic ones, seem to go about as far as it is possible to go in

the direction of evil. In particular, a modern factory reaches almost the limit of horror” (in McLellan 1990: 278).

This comment is interesting, because just as in modern times we have seen an increasing mechanisation of both work and of warfare, so the model of an industrial process has been applied to the organisation of warfare, and generally with similar results for the people involved. Jonathon Shay, for instance, describes this as the fundamental incompetence of the Vietnam war (1995: 17, 204). It could be argued that it is inevitable that war will go to the limit of horror – that this is the nature of war – and there is probably a lot of truth in this. But certainly in modern warfare and particularly in the Vietnam war, it seems that official policy greatly increased the brutalizing effect of war by denying and disallowing the human needs of the soldiers in the name of a kind of mechanical efficiency, in which the human beings involved were regarded simply as things or quantities.

The afore-mentioned Jonathon Shay is an American psychiatrist working with Vietnam veterans. In the mid 1990s he wrote a book called *Achilles in Vietnam*, in which he compared the account of warfare in Homer’s Iliad with warfare in Vietnam. Shay concluded from his work with veterans that participants in war need strong human bonds based on love, trust, respect, loyalty, even more than they do in peacetime. They need to feel that they are recognised and valued as human beings. In fact for soldiers, the army takes the place of the family, friends and community that they left behind, and they gain great support and sustenance from these bonds (Shay 1995: 39ff). It also helps a lot if soldiers are able to regard and to respect the enemy as human. Shay emphasises

this – the ugliest wars are those against an enemy conceived to be subhuman (1995: 103-119). These are all vital needs, according to Shay, these are what sustain people and help to limit and prevent some of the nastiness of war. Moreover, soldiers are often much better fighters if they are inspired by love and respect and loyalty rather than by anger and resentment.

Of course, the Vietnam War by its very nature was a difficult and problematic war. But even so, it seems that the official attitude made it far worse than it needed to be for those involved. In all kinds of ways, what Weil would understand as the needs of the soul were officially denied and disallowed.

For instance, soldiers were trained far more deliberately than in earlier wars to be like blindly efficient killing machines. Bastardisation – the deliberate humiliation and brutalization of conscripts – was actively encouraged in order to desensitize them, to “break down ... existing morals and norms and to accept a new set of values which embrace destruction, violence and death as a way of life” (Cooper 2000a: 33). Often it was thought that such humiliation would not only desensitize them and toughen them up but would also “fire up” the soldiers, and their anger would make them better fighters and more willing killers (Shay 1995: 201).

The enemy was consistently demonized, characterised as subhuman vermin. It was a war of extermination, and both sides committed terrible atrocities. Many American veterans were very disturbed afterwards by what they had done to the enemy, and, back home, were unable to understand how they could have done it (Shay 1995: 103-119).

The development of bonds of loyalty and friendship between soldiers was actively discouraged, and regarded with suspicion. Officers were rotated regularly so that they would not become too close to the men under their control. Sometimes, if they did not want to leave their men, they were accused of having “gone native” or of turning against “the program”, and were forced out. Officers were encouraged to direct battles by radio from behind the lines or from helicopters, rather than going into battle along with their men, and ordinary soldiers felt considerable cynicism and hostility towards officers because of this (Shay 1995: 14ff).

More often than not soldiers were denied the opportunity to grieve for lost comrades. Unlike previous wars, very little allowance was made for retrieval of the dead, for ceremonies for the dead, or for grieving on the part of those who had lost friends (Shay 1995: 57). Bodies were not buried there, but were quickly returned to America (Shay 1995: 58-9). Grief was often regarded as a sign of weakness, that you were not fit for the job – human attachments and sympathies generally tended to be regarded in this way. A common attitude was “just get over it”, or “get your mind straight”, or “don’t get sad, get even”. According to Shay, to weep in Vietnam was to lose one’s dignity. Tears were the sign of a weakling, a loser, or were evidence of mental sickness that required medication (Shay 1995: 63).

These are just a few examples; the list could go on for a very long time. But to sum up: Weil always emphasised that the needs of the soul are as imperative as the needs of the body, and for these to be denied is for a human being to suffer a dark, alienated and

brutal kind of life. War by its very nature is brutal and dehumanising, and at a time like this the needs of the soul are perhaps even more important. Weil believed that it is up to human beings to try to maintain an environment that can protect the soul from harm, even in brutal times, and to prevent this descent into a darkness in which things such as love, beauty, goodness, truth are absent.

As Weil says, war crushes the soul and turns it into a thing. But what seems to have happened in modern warfare is that it has become deliberate policy to turn people into things, to crush their souls in this way, for the sake of some kind of supposed efficiency. In the Vietnam War in particular, concepts such as souls and humanity were regarded with suspicion or contempt. It is not that soldiers shouldn't be trained to be tough. It is that in making them tough, those in control also denied and ridiculed all that made the toughness bearable for the soldiers, all that could inspire them far more than simply blind obedience or anger or resentment, and that could make the war a far more decently fought war. Simone Weil's concern for the needs of the soul is not naïve and sentimental. As we see from the aftermath of wars such as the Vietnam war, as well as being good and compassionate, it is in fact very practical advice.

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