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Simone Weil: Beauty and the Great Beast

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I. SIMONE WEIL AND THE IDEA OF BEAUTY

When reading Hanako Ikeda's paper on Simone Weil there were certain points raised that coincided with my own interest in this philosopher and which, I think, are deserving of further elucidation. Firstly I want to discuss in more detail Simone Weil's belief that the encounter with beauty, by catching us off guard, can illuminate what we see in a way quite different from our ordinary vision. For this has, for the most part, become dulled by an over-reliance on habit and convention. Beauty, on the other hand, can have the power to focus our attention on the present moment banishing our usual pre-occupations with past or future events momentarily into the background. As Hanako says on p. 2 of her paper, 'Weil makes a clear distinction between existence and reality.' For Weil, what is most real is obscured by our everyday existence, but an encounter with beauty, which we can learn to recognise if we remain sensitive and attentive to the feelings it arouses within us, is one of the ways in which our sight might be restored to us. There is a sense of being drawn out of ourselves; to responding to something other than we are, for 'Beauty' Weil says, 'captivates the flesh in order to obtain permission to pass right to the soul' (Weil, 1987, p. 135). But in order to consent or give permission for this to happen we must first be attentive to the supplication beauty makes to us. It is not by working out beforehand, and then imposing this predetermined idea of the beautiful onto certain objects of the world that allows it to appear before us, but nor will it appear without our willingness to acknowledge it. Heidegger, I believe, is advocating the need for a similar sensitivity and openness to what appears before us, in his book *Poetry, Language, Thought*, when he asks,

When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear by means of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents—that is, explains—to the thinking that responds and recalls (Heidegger, 1975, p. 181).

II. THE ERROR OF THE PERSONAL AND THE COLLECTIVE

In order to understand the significance behind this way of thinking perhaps we should look in more detail at why Simone Weil places such a great emphasis on the idea that what is of most importance lies beyond our own limited notion of how we see the world. This, in the main, has

to do with our tendency to live our lives caught up, either in a highly self-absorbed and individualistic way of being, or in one that is in obedience to a rather indistinct, but seemingly all pervasive, collective will. Or perhaps, she argues, both these states are present in us, but in varying proportions at different times. We also often appear blind to our condition or on the occasions when we do become aware of it we seem powerless to counter it effectively. For Weil what is most real is equated with the sacred or the desire for the absolute good, and neither an individual's personality nor the collective have access to it. She says of the collectivity that 'it is not only alien to the sacred but deludes us with a false imitation of it' (Weil, 1986, p. 76). It becomes something we follow blindly and thoughtlessly, rarely asking where its authority lies until eventually and imperceptibly we become enslaved to the received opinion of others or, as Weil commonly refers to it, following Plato, the great beast. Though who these others are that hold us so tightly in their sway seems to remain a mystery. Heidegger also points out the hidden nature of our subjection to others in *Being and Time* where he relates how Dasein,

As everyday being-with-one-another, stands in subjection to Others. It itself *is* not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. Dasein's everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please. These Others, moreover, are not definite Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them (Heidegger, 1962, p. 164).

These concerns about how the unseen influence of others seem to shape our lives, as well as our ways of thinking, appear to have serious repercussions for education, as shown in Plato's description, in Book VI of the Republic, of how the power that society exerts can become the most dominant influence in a person's education. He first describes how important it is for an individual to receive a suitable education, for it is this that allows the philosophical nature room to grow, and in so doing encourages a person's disposition to reorient itself towards the goal of seeking perfect goodness. For Plato, this appears to be the ultimate purpose of education, or of life itself; quite literally living a life that is good. But he warns that 'if its germination and growth take place in an unsuitable educational environment, then without divine intervention its destination will inevitably be completely the opposite' (Plato, 1993, p. 213). Plato goes on to say how the masses often lay the blame of the corruption of the younger generation at the door of their professional teachers, yet that this source of corruption is insignificant when compared with the influence that the crowd itself exerts.

Don't you think, rather, that it is the very people who make this claim who are the most influential teachers, and who provide the most thorough education and form men and women of all ages into any shape they want? (Plato, 1998, p. 213)

Plato then describes how it becomes almost impossible for an individual, no matter how well educated, or well intentioned, not to be swept along by the opinion of the general public, for 'how can the education he received outside this public arena stand up to it . . . without being overwhelmed . . . and swept away at the mercy of the current?' (ibid.). These opinions are then what commonly come to form the substance of public standards as they are understood by the multitude, and any deviation from these norms is met with such censure that it is difficult for an

individual to resist being dragged along in their wake for if the opinion of these others 'have failed to indoctrinate someone . . . they punish disobedience with forfeiture of rights, and with fines and death' (p. 214) until an individual finds that they too end up 'with the same moral standards and the same habits' (p. 213) as everyone else. The teachers themselves are not immune from this influence as they too are part of, and have been formed by such opinion and are heavily 'outnumbered by powerful sources of corruption' (p. 212). Is it any wonder then, asks Plato, that 'any teacher or privately received instruction' (p. 214) has the strength to hold out against such pressures as these. Would it not rather be the case that what was being taught was 'nothing but the attitudes the masses form by consensus' (ibid.).

Also in the Republic, Plato describes how the way that society comes to form its opinions resembles most closely that of a keeper of a great beast who takes notice of what 'makes it angry, what it desires, how it is to be approached or handled . . . and what tones of voice make it gentle or wild' (Plato, 1998, p. 214). It is then the understanding gleaned from the creature's reactions that the keeper goes on to call knowledge and which then becomes the subject matter for his teaching, but in reality, says Plato, he remains ignorant 'about which of the creature's attitudes and desires is commendable or deplorable, good or bad, moral or immoral' (p. 215). The keeper has no other criteria to base his judgments on other than the desires of the beast and so calls good or bad whatever conforms to the attitudes of the great beast. This might well be seen as a very unsound basis from which to form opinions as the keeper 'hasn't realised and can't explain to anyone else how vast a gulf there is between necessity and goodness' (ibid.). In other words any judgement will not be made from any understanding or direct perception of the good, but will only be based on the prevailing opinion of the good which in turn lies under the dominion of the great beast.

Simone Weil, in a chapter from *Gravity and Grace* entitled the 'The Great Beast', also highlights how, through the power of the social element, certain ideas or opinions can gain a foothold which it then becomes very difficult for others to disagree with without feeling that they are at fault in some way or that they may be mistaken. She explains how 'agreement between several men brings with it a feeling of reality. It brings with it also a sense of duty. Divergence, where this agreement is concerned, appears as a sin' (Weil, 1987, p. 147). This is a very powerful form of control and to stand against it is difficult and brings with it a sense of guilt or transgression, and so submission to the prevailing norm comes to be seen as the right thing to do, even if this means the suppression of one's own thoughts, or perhaps one's own thoughts become formed by what those others say. Weil continues, 'Hence *all* returns to the fold are possible. The state of conformity is an imitation of grace' (ibid., italics in original). For even if agreement has been reached by all concerned this is no guarantee that the decision is in line with the good, but society may still wrongly deem it to be so. The good will not simply cease to be the good because people have failed to recognise it, nor will common agreement make what isn't the good into the good, this lies outside the sphere of human intentionality. But many still might be prone to the influence of the dominant view without realising they have been caught up in it, and it is this view that holds a person captive and suppresses the need to engage, in any meaningful way, with what confronts them. And perhaps this is why the great beast is such a powerful force; we are simply unaware of its existence and are, to a large extent, part of it.

It is not only in our obedience to the Great Beast where all sense of the Good or sacred is lost,

but it is also lost by an individual who believes, as Weil says, that the 'development of the personality is all that counts' (Weil, 1986, p. 76). But it is not by any act of will or simply by the power of our intellect that we can free ourselves from either of these two conditions. It is only in our ability to be touched by, or to respond to the sacred that we can hope to escape from the bondage of the personality or the collective. Simone Weil says,

It is only by entering the transcendental, the supernatural, the authentically spiritual order that man rises above the social. Until then, whatever he may do, the social is transcendent in relation to him (Weil, 1987, p. 146).

For Weil the sacred does not lie in the world, but there are things in the world that can act as intermediaries or catalysts which can awaken in any of us a sense of its presence. It is by remaining attentive and open to the manifestation of beauty in the world and the sense of love which it then elicits from us that we might train our eyes to gradually grow accustomed to recognising its presence.

III. THE RELATION BETWEEN LOVE AND TRUE SIGHT

The idea of love appears very important to Simone Weil and in her reading of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, she believes that 'the image of the sun and of sight, shows exactly what love is in man' (Weil, 1998, p. 134). The sun represents the good but in order to see the sun the faculty of sight is needed, but Weil insists that it would be wrong to believe 'that sight signifies the intelligence'. It needs more than the intelligence to perceive the good. She goes on to say that,

Plato, in the *Symposium*, says as definitely as possible that this faculty is love. By the eyes, by sight, Plato means love. This image makes the impossibility of egoism evident, for the eyes cannot see themselves. The unreality of things, which Plato so powerfully depicts in the metaphor of the cave, has no connection with the things as such; the things in themselves have the fullness of reality in that they exist. It is a question of things as the object for love (Weil, 1998, p. 134).

I interpret this to mean that in our usual relationship with objects in the world we see them just as things, and in that sense they are of course real to us, but with a slight change of perception, or perhaps with a change of heart, we possess the ability to respond to them in a way that allows them to captivate us rather than the other way round and awaken this sense of love within us which then turns our vision away from ourselves. It is through love that they can become intermediaries through which the reality of the world is revealed to us.

An artist may, for example, suddenly be drawn to the way that the sunlight falls onto the leaves of a tree, illuminating some and casting the rest into deep shadow, thereby heightening the sense of incandescent light and impenetrable shade. The visual phenomena in itself may be nothing out of the ordinary, it might even be said by some to be mundane, but it is the intensity

of recognition that is generated by the experience of watching light fall onto the leaves that is crucial here. Weil herself acknowledges that ‘The most commonplace truth when it floods the whole soul is like a revelation’ (Weil, 1987, p. 105). Where that feeling comes from is impossible to comprehend and is akin to the feeling of an intense love or yearning. Yet what is desired does not exist in the form of the object that is being observed. It would be foolish to say that the artist desired the leaves on the tree or the sunlight that fell upon them, that would be to miss the point. And yet these objects have been able to evoke a sense of recognition that in turn has the power to engender a feeling of yearning and desire; to awaken awareness of need and of lack. Weil describes the importance of this wistful, almost painful feeling found in the perception of beauty when she relates that,

If one does not seek means to evade the exquisite anguish it inflicts, then desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention (Weil, 1986, p. 92).

This is a love that cannot be possessive, for there is no object to be possessed, for what is loved is also what is absent and yet that doesn’t mean that it is not real, indeed it may turn out to be what is most real of all, as Weil explains,

Nothing which exists is absolutely worthy of love. We must therefore love that which does not exist.

This non-existent object of love is not a fiction, however, for our fictions cannot be any more worthy of love than we are ourselves, and we are not worthy of it (Weil, 1987, pp. 99–100).

This is perhaps where the idea of limit comes into play and unfortunately it may also be a source of human misery, for we can never possess what we most desire; it is separated from us by an infinite distance, and we must learn to accept this emptiness without seeking for imaginary consolations. For example in the belief that we will one day find the promised land or, on a less elevated scale, in our tendency to find or seek solace in all forms of social prestige or in their imaginary occurrence, or in the inflated desire that an idolatry of objects or other people can cause. As Weil says ‘all consolation in affliction separates us from love and from truth. That is the mystery of mysteries. When we touch it we are safe’ (Weil, 1987, p. 99).

IV. THE IDEAL OF THE IMPERSONAL

This leads me finally to give a brief response to Hanako’s comments on the distinction between the ‘self-regarding’ and the ‘other-regarding’ which, as she says, appears to be a very prevalent pre-occupation in the study of ethics, especially the idea of responsiveness to, or recognition of, the ‘other’. I think that a clear understanding of what is meant when we use these terms is vital here, because there may be a danger that otherwise they will become devalued through over-use or through lack of clarity in how they are being used. Hanako says that she believes Weil takes

up a position that appears to lie between these two points (self-regarding and other-regarding). This is an interesting idea which needs perhaps to be opened up further, but it is also dependent on the meaning that is given to the phrase 'other-regarding'.

I think Simone Weil is very precise and uncompromising in defining what she means when she talks about what it is that is worthy of respect in another human being. For Weil what is sacred in a human does not belong to either the person or the personality, in other words to any notion of the self as commonly perceived. But she believes that within every individual there exists a latent longing for an absolute good, an absolute good that does not, nor can not, exist within this world of appearances. This longing is something that an individual may not be aware of, as it is often masked by an absorbed self-interest or 'in a person's tendency to immolate' themselves 'in the collective' (Weil, 1986, p. 78). But it is the capacity that an individual possesses of becoming aware of this desire and then in turning their attention away from themselves and towards this good that constitutes what is to be respected in every being. It may often simply manifest itself in an intuitive or spontaneous action or gesture on the part of an individual without them even realising what they have done. Simone Weil relates just such an incident from her time working in difficult conditions as a factory worker.

A welder with a serious expression and dark spectacles sits opposite me, working intently. Each time I wince from the furnace heat on my face, he looks at me with a sad smile of fraternal sympathy which does me untold good (Weil, 1986, pp. 25-26).

It is, I believe, not a respect for the 'other' that is of most concern to Weil, but a respect for the absolute good to which every person has the ability to turn their love and attention and so become 'the sole intermediary through which good can descend from there and come among men' (Weil, 1986, p. 222). When this happens a person has reached an impersonal state of being which, in that moment, the collective and the personal can no longer touch. She says,

Every man who has once touched the level of the impersonal is charged with a responsibility towards all human beings; to safe guard, not their persons, but whatever frail potentialities are hidden within them for passing over to the impersonal (Weil, 1986, pp. 77-78).

Such a position might possibly come into conflict with an 'ethics of care' or for that matter the current concern with the importance of difference, for these are things that I believe Simone Weil would see as belonging to the realm of the personal.

For Weil the importance of education lies in encouraging others to become attentive to these 'frail potentialities' in order that they might begin to recognise them more clearly as they arise. To finish Weil says,

The only serious aim of schoolwork is to train the attention. Mental gymnastics rely on an inferior, discursive form of attention, which reasons. Properly directed, however, this attention may give rise in the soul to another, of the highest kind, which is intuitive attention. Pure, intuitive attention is the only source of perfectly beautiful art, truly original and brilliant scientific discovery, of philosophy which really aspires to wisdom and of true, practical love of one's neighbour (Weil, 1986, p. 273).

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