

NOTES FROM: *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, edited by Eric O. Springsted

SUMMARY: I'd like to introduce you to one of my favorite people *ever*. Her name is Simone Weil, and I've learned more from her than almost anyone I've *ever* read or been in contact with, *ever*. That's three "*evers*" I just used. That shows you how serious I am!

She might actually be one of the greatest and most compassionate human beings who ever lived, and whenever I think of truth, or goodness, or beauty, or justice, I tend to think of her. She taught me how to listen, how to really "see" other people, how to demand the most from myself, and how to give the most *of* myself. In fact, Albert Camus called her "the only great spirit of our time."

This was back in the middle of the 20th century, as she died in 1943 at the age of 34. Why so young? The answer is that she starved herself to death - defying her doctor's orders to eat - in solidarity with the French citizens living under Nazi occupation during World War 2. She refused to eat any more food than the French people were allowed to eat (she was living in England at this time) under German rule, and with eating such a small amount of food, she died of malnutrition.

I have mixed feelings about this. Of course, what she did was so completely selfless and incredible and totally in line with who she was as a person and with what she believed to be true.

On the *other* hand, what could such a brilliant philosopher like her have contributed through her works that would have had a much larger positive impact on the future health of humanity? No one knows, and that's part of the tragedy and absurdity of her death.

What you almost have to respect about her though is her total commitment to her ideals. Unlike pseudo-intellectuals like Karl Marx and friends, she actually spent time working in factories *herself* so that she could understand more about the life of the urban poor and gain insight into what they were *actually* like and what they needed.

She didn't disdain physical labor but instead *embraced* it as a chance to get closer to what's most real. She thought it unusual - as I do - that we complain about low pay, but not about soul-crushing work *itself*. It's like saying, "That's not enough money! My soul is worth at least *twice* that amount!" Ridiculous, right?

As I hope you'll see from these book notes below, Simone Weil was a *very* special philosopher, a woman of unimpeachable intellectual honesty, and the possessor of the type of limitless compassion - and stubbornness - that could have only ended with her death. In so many ways, I just wanna be like her!

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“The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting. There is no entry into the transcendent until the human faculties - intelligence, will, human love - have come up against a limit, and the human being waits at this threshold, which he can make no move to cross, without turning away and without knowing what he wants, in fixed, unwavering attention. It is a state of extreme humiliation. Genius is the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought.”

“The difference between people more or less intelligent is like the difference between prisoners condemned to life in prison whose cells are more or less large. An intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a prisoner who is proud of having a big cell.”

“Thinking that one has the world down as a system fails at understanding either the world or reason itself.”

“The world indeed grips us and we feel it, and whatever we feel is the direct result of the world.”

MK: The meanings we read into external events grip us more strongly than our own internal thought processes, but they both come from us, which is strange.

“Because our impressions come with an immediacy and a directness that is quite strong, there is a temptation to assign to them absolute reality. Yet, they still come from us.”

“Whatever we do implies a choice of values, and we are never without values.”

“Philosophy seeks a ranking to value.”

“We do not know how to think of truth, beauty, and the good as one, and yet they cannot be thought of separately.”

“All efforts of thought bearing on anything other than value are, if one examines them closely, foreign to philosophy.”

“Values are unknowable, simply because we accept them as given when forming hypotheses.”

“We can't just resign ourselves to not knowing them, however, and thus, human life has a contradiction at its center.”

“The condition of the artist striving always towards a beauty he cannot know mixes anguish into every effort of artistic creation.”

“Everything that can be taken as an end cannot be defined.”

“Means, such as power or money, are easily defined, and that is why people orient themselves exclusively towards the acquisition of means.”

“There is another contradiction, and that is taking means for ends.”

“The logical rule of non-contradiction is not applicable in philosophy.”

“The mind can never be uncertain about whether the concept of value is indeed fictional. For the mind essentially and always, in whatever manner is disposed, strives toward value. It cannot regard the notion of value itself as uncertain, without regarding its own existence as uncertain, and that is impossible.”

“The rigor and certitude of philosophical investigation are as great as they can be; the sciences don't even come close. Do we then have to conclude that philosophical reflection is infallible? Yes, if we actually engaged in it. But human nature renders philosophical reflection pretty much impossible. For since the mind is always straining towards some value, how can it stand back, detaching itself from the value towards which it is moving in order to consider and judge it, and to rank it in relation to other values?”

“Detachment is necessary, but that already implies detachment from all values.”

“Painting is philosophy that uses lines and color.”

“Man tends to construct an infinite out of the finite; a construction that is probably the very definition of art.”

Plato: "Never, in any way, is god unjust. He is just to the supreme degree, and there is nothing more like him than the one who among us is the most just. Knowing that is wisdom and true virtue."

“The reward of the good consists in the faith that one is good, the punishment of the evil is in the fact that one is evil.”

“The good is above justice and the other virtues; we seek them out insofar as they are good.”

“There is no other object of desire for human beings than the good.”

“There is not, there cannot be any other relation between a human and God except love. What is not love has no relation to God.”

“Anytime that one thinks that a conversion took place without a certain minimum quantity of violence and pain, well, that conversion never truly took place.”

“But what is the criterion? The sense of effort and suffering are not it; there are imaginary sufferings and efforts.”

“In everything that is real, there is something irreducible.”

“The evil that is within us is finite, as we are. The good by whose help we fight it is outside us and is infinite. Therefore it is absolutely sure that evil will be vanquished.”

“The virtues are beauty in action.”

“The world's beauty inspires a love that cannot have matter as its object.”

“There cannot be any other proofs of god except the proof of god by love, for god is not something other than the Good, and there is no other entity that can enter into contact with him except love.”

“Just as one cannot recognize sounds by sight, in the same way, love is the only faculty that can recognize God.”

“This pure good has two reflections, one is in our soul and is the idea of the good, the other is in the world in its beauty.”

“The order of the world is the beauty, and is not a definable order.”

“The most perfect being does not have, and has never had, license to do anything other than the most beautiful thing.”

“Is our voice that we hear the real one, or is it the voice the other person hears?”

“What guarantee do we have that one day we will not become, despite ourselves, something that we hate, or at least something that is utterly foreign to us?”

“Every effort of the mystics has always sought to reach the place when there is no longer anything in the soul that says ‘I.’”

“Not only is the collectivity foreign to the sacred, but it misleads us by offering a false imitation of it.”

“Each of those who has penetrated into the domain of the impersonal has encountered there a responsibility towards all human beings.”

“Exactly in the same measure as art and science, so physical labor, although in a different way, is a certain contact with reality, truth, the beauty of the universe, and with the eternal wisdom that constitutes the order of the universe.”

"They thus forget that the object that they are bargaining about - the one they complain that someone is forcing them to hand over cheaply, the one someone is refusing them a just price for - is nothing other than their soul."

“Imagine bargaining for your soul and saying ‘It is really shameful for you to offer only this price; the thing is worth at least twice that.’”

“Many indispensable truths that could save human beings are not spoken for various reasons; those who could speak them cannot formulate them, those who could formulate them cannot say them. The remedy for this great evil should be one of the pressing problems for a true politics.”

“The possession of a right implies the possibility of using that right for either good or bad. Rights are therefore alien to the good. On the contrary, the accomplishment of an obligation is always good, everywhere. Truth, beauty, justice, compassion, are always good, everywhere.”

“The love of truth is always accompanied by humility. Real genius is nothing else than the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought.”

“Even the greatest human achievements are miserable atrocities compared to the perfection that alone is desirable.”

“Even when it puts things well, a mind enclosed in language is in prison. Its limit is the number of relations that words can render present to it at the same time. It remains in ignorance of thoughts implying a greater number of relations; these thoughts are beyond language, unformulatable, no matter how perfectly rigorous and clear they may be and no matter how the relations that went into them were expressible in perfectly clear terms. Thus the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth, which can be more or less big, without ever being able to cast a glance on what is beyond it.”

“If a captive mind ignores its own captivity, it lives in error. If it recognizes it, even if for a tenth of a second, and if it is pressed to forget it in order to avoid suffering, it lives a lie. Extremely brilliant people of intelligence can be born, live, and die in error and falsity. In these people intelligence is not a good or even an advantage.”

“Listening to someone is to put ourselves in his place while he is speaking. Putting ourselves in the place of a being whose soul is mutilated by affliction, or who is in imminent danger of becoming such a being, is to annihilate one's own soul. It is more difficult than suicide would be for a happy child. Thus the afflicted are not heard.”

“Justice consists in standing guard so that evil is not done to human beings.”

“When evil is done to someone, evil really penetrates into him; not only pain and suffering, but the horror of evil itself. Just as people have the power of transmitting good to each other, they also have the power of transmitting evil. One can transmit evil to another human being by flattery, or by handing out pleasures and material comforts; but most often people transmit evil to others by doing harm to them.”

MK: Simone Weil says the same thing as Martha Nussbaum when talking about the criminal justice system, and how the purpose of inflicting the harm of punishment is to reintegrate the former criminal into society after building the criminal back up again.

“Punishment is uniquely a procedure for giving pure good to those who do not want it; the art of punishing is the art of evoking in criminals the desire for pure good by pain, and even by death.”

MK: I'm not sure that I could ever sanction capital punishment in the same way that Weil does, although she says it should be done in the same spirit as all other punishment.

“We have entirely lost the concept of punishment. We no longer know that it consists in providing goodness. For us, it stops at inflicting hurt.”

“We think so little of the redemptive power of punishment that we throw it at people who we know will make no use of it. We have no intention of helping them make use of it.”

“For criminals, true punishment; for the afflicted for whom affliction has bitten into the bottom of their souls, a help capable of leading them to supernatural springs to quench their thirst; for everybody else, a life of well-being, including much beauty, and protection against those who would do them harm; everywhere a rigorous limitation to the tumult of lies, propaganda, and opinions; the establishment of a silence where the truth can sprout and grow. These things are what are due to human beings.”

“Much can be accomplished if among those who are in charge of showing to the public what things are worthy of praise, of admiration, of hope, of investigation, of inquiry, that at least some of them resolve in their hearts to scorn absolutely and without exception everything that is not pure goodness, perfect, true, just, and loving.”

“Public functions have no other significance other than the possibility of doing good to human beings.”

“Above the institutions that are meant to protect rights, persons, and democratic liberties, it is necessary to invent other ones that are meant to discern and to abolish all that which, in contemporary life, buries souls under injustice, lies, and ugliness. It is necessary to invent them, for they are unknown, and it is impossible to doubt that they are indispensable.”

“Focused attention on the transcendent is the point of unity and can be achieved by everyone who is serving any social function whatsoever, thereby achieving equality with everyone.”

“Authority should only be present when it can't be absent.”

“The entire society should be constituted in such a way that work does not drag down those who perform it.”

“It is not enough to want to spare them these forms of suffering; it would be necessary to want joy for them, not pleasures that are paid for, but joy that is free and that does not cast a slur on the spirit of poverty.”

“Nothing is so essential to human life, for all people and at every moment, as good and evil. When literature becomes deliberately indifferent to the opposition of good and evil, it betrays its function and has no pretence to excellence.”

“If our present suffering ever does lead to a moral reorientation, it will not be accomplished by slogans, but in silence and moral solitude, through pain, misery, terror, in the deepest part of each spirit.”

“One cannot regret that the world must come to an end, because it was, by its very nature, limited.”

“Only matter and energy exist, and the good is one of its potentialities.”

“The stars are the farthest from and the closest to the human being.”

“How does one conceive the space that separates two stars, a locus that undoubtedly, as all spaces are, is full of infinitely varied events, yet that never determines any change in the relation of the things it unites? And despite the perfection of our telescopes and the sophisticated research of spectroscopy, we still do not know any more about it today; we cannot know more about it; the fittingness of the stars with the needs of the human imagination is an irreducible mystery. Games and tools at first seem less mysterious, since they are man-made. But that we can make such objects, and work with them on the supposition that they are, barring accidents, immutable, working with them all the while thinking about spheres, circles, planes, points, or right angles, working with them so effectively, that is a matter of grace that is just as extraordinary as the existence of the stars. It is one and the same grace, and, strange as it may be, the object of scientific study is nothing other than this grace.”

“The act of virtue is to loving God as drawing a straight line on a chalkboard is to conceiving of an actually perfect straight line that can never be adequately expressed.”