
The Cross, the Flesh, and the Absent God: Finding Justice through Love and Affliction in Simone Weil's Writings*

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Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. (Matthew 5:6)

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, numerous debates have been waged over the many existing (and often conflicting) theories and concepts of justice that exist in popular and academic circles. These debates are dependent upon, and shaped by, the many systems of belief that underlie these different understandings: notions of a social contract, standards of utility, and/or a framework of rights.¹

While it is clear that there are many conceptualizations (and, subsequently, many underlying rationalizations) of justice,² in the Western world, most particularly in North America, discussions inevitably turn to the idea of rights—human and property—and equate these rights with personal liberty and freedom. Interestingly, what has most characterized the debate about justice and human rights is that which is left unsaid: the notion of human responsibilities and obligations. This silence can be witnessed throughout the language used in our systems of law, which privilege personal rights over responsibilities to others and to society; in our media, which is rife with discussions about rights,

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¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 1.

² A thorough discussion of these conceptualizations is beyond the scope of this article, but for a more detailed discussion, please see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

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rights infringements, and the loss of rights; and in our daily discussions with others, where we debate what is owed to us, what belongs to us, and what rights we have as citizens of our respective countries.³ This unification of justice and rights in political and social discourse ignores, and indeed impedes, a conception of justice that is built upon human responsibilities and obligations—a conception that Simone Weil (1909–43), a French philosopher and mystic, attempted to bring to the forefront of political and popular discourse with her writings.

Simone Weil spent much of her short life thinking and theorizing about systems of human justice and, through her work, sought to bring back human responsibilities and obligations to the discussions and discourse. Simone was particularly concerned that modern justice systems are based solely on human rights—that is, what others can do for us—rather than on human responsibilities and obligations—that is, what we can do for others—and believed that this notion of “justice as rights” was simply inadequate.

Going further, Simone was particularly interested in discovering a system of earthly justice that would lead to divine justice (i.e., Justice). For Simone, if we unite justice with responsibilities and obligations, rather than rights, not only can it lead to a more just society on this earth, but it can also assist us in the recovery of our spiritual roots and can point the way to the manifestation of divine justice in this life. Simone believed that a justice linked to rights does not allow for God or divine love (i.e., Love) to penetrate and affect this world—in short, it does not allow for “the growing of roots.”⁴ Indeed, by focusing on responsibilities and obligations, we have the opportunity to unite justice with love, leading to a more divine understanding of both.

Simone believed that “divine Love is the perfect model of justice,”⁵ and that this divine love (and thus this justice) can be understood only through attention, affliction, and consent to the absence of God. For Simone, attention of the soul ever-upward to God—made possible through consent and affliction—is of utmost importance, for it provides the opportunity for the soul and the flesh to make ready for God’s love and justice. This attention and surrendering to affliction require great faith and perseverance—waiting for grace but not know-

³ Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan, 1991).

⁴ This phrase is the title of the third and final chapter in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Willis (New York: Routledge, 1952), 183.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, trans. and ed. Elisabeth Chase Beissbuhler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), 120.

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ing that it will come—but without this faith, attention, affliction, and consent, true justice—divine justice—can never manifest itself in this world.

Simone Weil's work still rings true, and the lessons about justice, love, affliction, and the absence of God written within hold much for us to learn and meditate upon. As such, this article will examine Simone Weil's propositions of justice and will argue that true justice should be based on human responsibilities and obligations, not solely on human rights: a form of justice that can be obtained only through attention and supernatural friendship, through consent to the madness of divine love, and through an embracing of affliction and the absence of God—conditions that, once met, will allow for a new understanding and a new form of justice to manifest in ourselves and in society. First, however, a section about Simone Weil's life is in order, for she was one of those rare individuals who truly embodied the ideas of justice and faith in which she believed and about which she theorized.

BACKGROUND: THE LIFE OF A SAINT

When writing about an individual such as Simone Weil, I hope to be able to point the reader toward her thoughts and direct the reader toward her writings. One must simply read her works, nay, *consume* her works, and let their mysteries and consummate clarity pass through the flesh, to be lived to the fullest through everyday existence. For what can be said about this woman, this philosopher, this saint who uttered the statement: "Every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ I commit the sin of envy?"⁶ Ultimately, Simone Weil's writings must be experienced personally and intimately, for there comes a time when one must simply "listen, be silent, pay attention, study."⁷ Nonetheless, I will attempt to clarify her beliefs and give the reader a starting point for understanding Simone Weil and her ideas of justice, love, affliction, and the absent God.

Simone lived daily with a strong sense of justice, self-sacrifice, and absolute compassion and empathy for the suffering and the downtrodden. This sense was manifest in her every action and can be witnessed from a very young age. For example, when Simone was barely three years old, a cousin visited and presented her with an expensive ring

⁶ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 83.

⁷ George Grant, "Introduction to Simone Weil (1970)," in *The George Grant Reader*, ed. William Christian and Sheila Grant (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 238.

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set with a large jewel. Simone politely declined the extravagant gift by saying, “I do not like luxury.”⁸

When Simone was three and a half, she had a violent attack of appendicitis and was hospitalized. It was during her stay at the hospital, recovering from surgery, that Simone’s mother, Selma Weil, entertained her with a story that Simone claimed had an influence on her entire life: *Marie in Gold and Marie in Tar*: “The heroine of this fairy tale, who was sent by her stepmother into the forest, reaches a house where she is asked whether she wants to enter by the door in gold or the door in tar. “For me,” she replies, “tar is quite good enough.” This was the right answer and a shower of gold fell on her. When her stepmother saw her bring back the gold, she then sent her own daughter into the forest. But when asked the same question, her daughter chose the golden door and was deluged by tar.”⁹ The mentality of the heroine in this fairy tale reflected the attitude of Simone from an early age: the notions of self-sacrifice, humility, and humbleness had become a way of life for Simone since the early stages of her life.

When World War I began in 1914, Simone was deeply affected by the suffering, violence, and tragedy of the war: at the age of five, she stopped eating sugar and other foods that the fighting soldiers did not have available to them.¹⁰ By the age of seven, Simone and her brother, André Weil (one of the most eminent mathematicians of the twentieth century), began corresponding with adopted “godchildren”: soldiers who had no families and were adopted by civilians who wished to help the war cause by sending the soldiers letters, food, and clothes. Simone and André sent their adopted soldiers most of their sugar and all of their chocolate treats. One Easter, they received two huge chocolate Easter eggs as a present, promptly refused to eat them, and sent the giant eggs immediately to their godsons.¹¹ It was around this time that Simone and her brother also decided to give up the luxury of wearing knee-socks, even in the coldest of weather. Both children had an innate sense of self-sacrifice and doing without life’s comforts—if other people in the world had to go without, then they themselves would also go without.¹²

Simone was also intensely self-reflective and self-critical. By the time she was ten years old, Simone considered herself lacking the natural

⁸ Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ Christopher Frost and Rebecca Bell-Metereau, *Simone Weil: On Politics, Religion and Society* (London: Sage, 1998), 11.

¹¹ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

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abilities required of a true genius or, as she discerned it, the ability to realize intellectual and moral truth clearly and with relative ease. By the time she was fourteen years old, Simone's depression from this perceived inadequacy caused her to contemplate suicide for a short time. A statement made by Simone near the end of her life, describing her childhood years, portrays her intense self-criticism, her yearning for truth, and her profound intellectual maturity:

After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius too, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment. He thus becomes a genius too, even though for lack of talent his genius cannot be visible from outside. . . . Under the name of truth I also included beauty, virtue, and every kind of goodness. . . . The conviction that had come to me was that when one hungers for bread, one does not receive stones.¹³

Since Simone was always so concerned about the fate of the poor and the less privileged, she did not often focus on her studies at a young age, yet she still excelled as a talented scholar and academic. One morning, when Simone was eleven years old, she disappeared from the house and her schoolwork. There was a labor demonstration on the Boulevard Saint-Michel that morning, and that is where Simone was found: she had gone to a rally protesting the conditions of the unemployed.¹⁴ Yet despite her many distractions, Simone succeeded in earning her teaching degree in philosophy in July 1931 and began teaching at the Le Puy lycée for girls that August. She was so greatly admired and loved by her students that they quickly began calling her "our Simone."¹⁵

Simone, however, was not to be satisfied with the life of an academic and, detesting any sort of privileged position, she resigned from her teaching post and began her year-long experience of manual labor in the Renault factory. From 1934 to 1935, Simone entered what many scholars who study her works and her thought have called the "second period" of her life: a period of manual labor when, in her own words, she was left "in pieces, soul and body . . . the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. . . . There [in the factory] I received forever the mark of a slave, like the branding of the red-hot iron the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves. Since then

¹³ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 64.

¹⁴ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 20.

¹⁵ Michael Higgins, *Simone Weil: The Afflicted Genius of France* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1984), 10.

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I have always regarded myself as a slave.”¹⁶ It was during this year of factory work that Simone began to feel singled out by affliction and slavery and began to intensely ponder the notions of justice and equality, rights and obligations, and love for her fellow human beings, which subsequently shaped her writings from 1938 to her death.

Near the end of 1938, Simone discovered the works of the metaphysical English poets from the seventeenth century. In particular, she discovered George Herbert’s poem “Love” (1633) and proceeded to learn it by heart. It was during this period, when suffering from intense migraines that had plagued her since she was twelve years old, that Simone began reciting Herbert’s poem over and over again, devoting to it her complete and utter attention, clinging to the tenderness within the words with all her soul, attributing to it the virtue of a prayer. According to Simone, “It was during one of these recitations that . . . Christ himself came down and took possession of me. . . . Moreover, in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face.”¹⁷

Here we are astonished at Simone’s revelation, at the mystical event that portrays Christ as a physical manifestation in this earthly reality, and at the utter certainty and simplicity in which she shares this awesome event. Simone had touched something real and tangible, yet wholly divine and completely outside the realm of human existence: she had touched something that can only be attained through the passivity of inner life, something far beyond space and time and much greater than the self. Do we believe Simone Weil’s experience? Was she actually possessed by Christ? Ultimately, that shall be up to the reader. However, as Simone Weil’s friend and biographer (and a great philosopher in her own right), Simone Pétrement writes: “So if some ordinary person tells me that he has encountered God, I don’t believe it. But when a saint tells me, I must pay great attention to what he or she says. Because a saint is someone who knows how to resist the assaults of the ego and the imagination. The saintliness of the life is therefore the criterion; because if there is saintliness it is manifested in the life. The reason for believing in Simone Weil’s mystical experience is embodied in her life.”¹⁸

These many (and by no means exhaustive) examples of her affliction, self-sacrifice, and spiritual purity clearly portray her innate sense

¹⁶ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 66–67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

¹⁸ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 341.

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of fairness, justice, and equality—qualities that are plentiful and ubiquitous throughout the course of Simone’s short, but extraordinary, life.

At an early age, and perhaps because of her many experiences and deep sentiments for humanity, Simone, recognizing the limitations of the human soul, realized that there must be a system of justice that guides humans and society in this earthly realm: a justice based on responsibilities and obligations instead of rights, with all previous conventions of the modern judiciary system to be understood in a new, divine way. Indeed, it is within Simone’s actions, within her thoughts, and within her writings that we can witness her teachings on, and understanding of, justice, affliction, love, and the absent God that are the topic of the remainder of this article.

DEFINING JUSTICE: HUMAN RIGHTS VERSUS HUMAN OBLIGATIONS

According to Simone Weil, when words lose their meaning over time, the consequences may be morally harmful to individuals and to society. Justice, she believed, is one such word that has lost its meaning in modern times, becoming a vacuous, meaningless term, replaced by the empty notion of “rights”: rights for the individual and rights for the collectivity. Simone believed that humanity must strive to reclaim a meaningful sense of justice by struggling to regain an understanding of justice as a “supernatural virtue”—a virtue that includes a fresh view of the law and the judicial system. To do so, Simone believed that we must first differentiate between the concepts of justice and rights. To her, the notion of justice is unconditional and transcendent, based on consideration, compassion, duty, and love; it is situated on a higher plane than that of rights, and, as such, justice becomes a human obligation.

For Simone, “the object of any obligation, in the realm of human affairs, is always the human being as such. There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she *is* a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned.”¹⁹

In contrast, the notion of rights is always a legal one, most often applied to ideas of quantity and property. As Simone describes, “the notion of rights 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. Rights are always asserted in a tone of

¹⁹ Weil, *Need for Roots*, 4–5.

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contention; and when this tone is adopted, it must rely upon force in the background, or else it will be laughed at. . . . Justice consists in seeing that no harm is done to men. . . . The spirit of justice and truth is nothing else but a certain kind of attention which is pure love.”²⁰

Simone further illustrates the difference between obligation and rights through the dramatization of two cries: The cry of someone who is suffering injustice is “Why am I being hurt?” The notion of rights, being based on property and possessions, produces a different cry: “Why has somebody else got more than I have?”²¹ Clearly, for Simone, justice is based on seeing that no harm is done to another human, creating a situation of unconditional obligation toward one’s fellow beings: an obligation toward kindness and compassion. In this light, rights are focused on doing no harm to property or things. While justice is capable of manifesting in the human experience through love and compassion, according to Simone, rights have no direct connection with love—they are simply notions of utility. Ultimately, then, justice is beyond human control. It is limited by the human experience of the flesh, for it exists in the realm of the eternal. As Simone writes, “if justice requires us to be naked and dead in this life, it is clear that justice is something impossible for human nature, is something supernatural. What prevents the soul from assimilating itself to God through justice is primarily the flesh, of which Plato said . . . ‘*the body is the tomb of the soul.*’”²²

Despite the limitations of the flesh, justice has the ability to manifest within human experience through attention, love, and consent to God’s absence. Indeed, Simone believed that justice is possible within the world as a supernatural virtue bestowed upon the human soul by the longing for the absent God and that humans must be able to yearn for truth (i.e., Truth) and to love justice if they wish to create a just society on this earth. Finding very few examples in history where a society has lived her conception of a transcendent justice, Simone often utilized the words spoken by a soul on the way to salvation in the Egyptian Book of the Dead to prove that her notion of a divine justice based on obligations is possible in this world. Thousands of years ago, the Egyptians thought that a soul could not be “justified” after death

²⁰ Simone Weil, “Human Personality,” in *Selected Essays: 1934–1943*, trans. and ed. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 18, 30, 28. Originally compiled in this form and found in Richard H. Bell, *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 44.

²¹ Weil, “Human Personality,” 30.

²² Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, trans. and ed. Richard Rees (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 97.

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unless it could say, “I have never spoken with a haughty voice. I have never made anyone afraid. I have never been deaf to the words of justice and truth.”²³ I would also add one more sentence from *The Need for Roots*, for when combined, I believe that these sentences more fully reflect Simone’s notion of justice: “I have let no one suffer hunger.”²⁴

Simone was intimately connected to the spiritual understanding of justice as a supernatural virtue, but, being quite practical, she also realized and understood the needs of the human flesh. Consequently, she sought to create a new judicial system, based on responsibilities to fellow beings, rather than rights—justice as an eternal obligation—that society could implement and utilize. According to Simone, the origin of obligations is from the eternal realm and is not based upon any convention, “nor upon jurisprudence, customs, social structure, relative state of forces, historical heritage, or presumed historical obligation.”²⁵ In short, this obligation is eternal and unconditional and is accorded solely on the merit that one is human.

Simone equated the notion of law to the notion of obligation to fellow beings: an unconditional eternal obligation “towards the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance . . . [because] all Christians know they are liable to hear Christ himself say to them one day: ‘I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat.’”²⁶ A society in which all individuals manifest these eternal obligations and responsibilities to help and respect their fellow beings is precisely the way of justice as compassion. According to Simone, it is the role of the public sphere to create a system of laws based on our eternal obligations and truth,²⁷ for “the need of truth is more sacred than any other need.”²⁸ Indeed, it is this need for truth that will propel society to create a new system of law based on truth, justice, and eternal obligations that can provide a framework to guide human actions.

Simone Weil believed that laws, as long as they were based on principles of equity and obligation, helped individuals to “root,” that is, to find their place in society and in the cosmos, for “whoever is uprooted himself, uproots others. Whoever is rooted in himself doesn’t uproot others.”²⁹ Therefore, according to Simone, it is the responsibility and the obligation of any individual to do no harm to his/her fellow beings

²³ Simone, *Waiting for God*, 144.

²⁴ Weil, *Need for Roots*, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Bell, *Simone Weil*, 115.

²⁸ Weil, *Need for Roots*, 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

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by striving to root him-/herself both to this world and to the realm of the eternal, through obligations to fellow beings and through acceptance of a transcendent justice. Simultaneously, society also has the responsibility of creating and implementing a system of laws based on this notion of a higher justice: a justice bound to obligations, not rights.

Not everyone, however, is capable of rooting without aid; therefore, the soul needs a communal order that will govern and direct its behavior. For Simone, this communal order can be witnessed in a legal system in which individuals can participate and receive moral, intellectual, and spiritual guidance. Simone's vision of this new and just legal system is as follows: laws are meant to be a bridge linking the human and the divine, to be guiding principles that must be understood from a deeply spiritual perspective in order for the system to be just and equitable. Ultimately, the law and the judges who govern this law must love truth above all,³⁰ for through this love of truth the divine order of justice can manifest in the human realm.

ATTENTION AND SUPERNATURAL FRIENDSHIP

According to Simone, in order for society to obtain this notion of justice based on human obligations rather than on human rights, its individuals must surrender and turn attention to the divine realm and thus to the will and the love of God. Without this attention, there can be no connection to the eternal realm, and neither society nor its individuals will ever achieve a state of true justice, for "a society which has lost all contact with the supernatural, or the 'other reality,' must inevitably degenerate into a specimen of the 'social beast' as described by Plato in the Republic."³¹

Simone believed that a considerable amount of attention toward God is required, without which the virtue of justice cannot be received. It is through this attention, this absolute concentration and orientation of the soul at all times longing for grace, that we may hope to receive the manifestation of God's love in our flesh. This divine love is the very source of the virtues that Simone believed are needed for humanity, for "Supernatural Love is their [justice's, truth's] inspiration and immediate source, and they cannot proceed from elsewhere."³² There-

³⁰ Bell, *Simone Weil*, 112–13.

³¹ Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 83.

³² Weil, *Intimations*, 123.

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fore, without this attention to love, we cannot hope to ever receive justice in this earthly realm.

Simone defined attention in this way: “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. . . . Above all, our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.”³³ This naked truth, ready to penetrate the object that is attentive, is through love and supernatural friendship—states achievable only through attention to God.

How then is this love and supernatural friendship to be witnessed and achieved in this world? For Simone, the answer was simple: Love thy neighbor. Simone stated what this entails so beautifully and so eloquently in a letter to Father Perrin that it is worth quoting at length:

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough.

In the first legend of the Grail, it is said that the Grail (the miraculous vessel that satisfies all hunger by virtue of the consecrated Host) belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, “What are you going through?”

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled “unfortunate,” but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way.³⁴

According to Simone, this “certain way” of looking is first of all attentive. For Simone, the central point of this attention is given to human beings rather than to things or to matter. Thus, love of one’s neighbor (as defined above) becomes one of the most central tenets in Simone Weil’s conception of justice. It is through this love for one’s neighbors that two human beings can meet in such circumstances that allow neither to be subject to the other, allowing each the equal opportunity to consent to the other, for “each one then, without ceasing

³³ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 111–12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

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to think in the first person, really understands that the other also thinks in the first person. Justice then occurs as a natural phenomenon.”³⁵ Clearly, on those occasions when there is equality on both sides, justice becomes a “supernatural” friendship—a friendship that results from harmony, respect, and an understanding of others’ needs and afflictions—a supernatural friendship capable of receiving the supernatural virtue of justice. In this light, justice becomes the notion of giving each person his or her due, and what is due is respect as an equal soul before God.

As Simone writes, if you apply the formula, “‘*Friendship is an equality made of harmony*’ to men, harmony has the meaning of the unity of contraries. The contraries are myself and the other, contraries so distant that they have their unity only in God. Friendship between human beings, and justice, are one and the same thing, except in the case where justice is imposed from outside by circumstances.”³⁶ Thus, an act of justice becomes a lightning flash, a divine jolt, between two friends where equity exists in their midst. According to Simone, if there is unilateral justice, one of the individuals will be injured or maimed, but if there is bilateral justice, then there exists harmony and consent. Simone went so far as to state that there is “no distinction between love of our neighbour and justice . . . [and] only the absolute identification of justice and love makes the coexistence possible of compassion and gratitude on the one hand, and on the other, of respect for the dignity of afflictions in the affliction—a respect felt by the sufferer himself and the others.”³⁷

The cultivation of this attention always toward God, however, requires great discipline: “a self-emptying, waiting, a ‘spiritual quartering,’—what she calls a ‘non-active action.’”³⁸ As difficult as this sounds, Simone believed that any human being could achieve this intense level of attention and concentration and thus could be subject to receiving grace, for this attention, this waiting, this affliction all serve to prepare one for the love of God.³⁹

How then is justice to be recognized and understood in this world? As Simone understands, “justice for man presents itself first as a choice, choice of the good, rejection of evil. . . . And basically the supreme justice for us is acceptance of the coexistence with ourselves of all

³⁵ Weil, *Intimations*, 173.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁷ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 139–40.

³⁸ Bell, *Simone Weil*, 48.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

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creatures and all things which make up the existent.”⁴⁰ As Simone so clearly elucidated, this supernatural virtue of justice is only possible through the acceptance of the coexistence of all creatures and through the love of fellow beings—actions that require love of and consent to authentic otherness and to God.

How is this consent possible? For Simone, consent is made possible by a life containing motives for consenting: destitution, privations of soul and body, and affliction.⁴¹ A precondition of consent is love—of God and of our neighbors—or the ability to live in truth. Simone writes, “to preserve it [this consent] religiously wherever it exists, to try to create conditions for it where it is absent, that is to love justice.” And continuing on, “to the extent to which at any given time there is some madness of love amongst men, to that extent there is some possibility of change in the direction of justice: and no further.”⁴² It is to the notions of consent and the madness of love that we now turn.

CONSENT AND THE MADNESS OF LOVE

For Simone, justice, strictly speaking, is not an acquired virtue: it is given by God in the form of divine love. This justice, although not acquired, is still related to human practices and actions such as attention and consent and to an unwavering love of fellow beings. To obtain this new virtue—the supernatural virtue of justice—we must consent to God and to his love. As Simone writes, “human consent is a sacred thing. It is what man grants to God. It is what God comes in search of when like a beggar he approaches men.”⁴³ This sacred consent happens when, and only when, our practices are of the form of love. As Richard H. Bell (1998) summarizes: “Any human practice that is of the form of love must presuppose mutual human consent and thus what we, as human beings, call up by consent is that part of us that is one with God and is thus God. Justice, therefore, is consenting to God to have God made present in our human practices, which are, themselves, of a form that is God’s love, i.e., of a form of unconditional love—a love that we rarely, if ever, recognize clearly.”⁴⁴

Therefore, the love of our neighbor is the love that comes down

⁴⁰ Weil, *Intimations*, 189.

⁴¹ Bell, *Simone Weil*, 51.

⁴² Simone Weil, “Are We Struggling for Justice?” trans. Marina Barabas, *Philosophical Investigations* 53 (January 1987): 5, as found in Bell, *Simone Weil*, 52.

⁴³ Weil, “Are We Struggling,” as found in Bell, *Simone Weil*, 57.

⁴⁴ Bell, *Simone Weil*, 58.

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from God to humans, a love succeeding our surrender that will rise to God, showing our soul that is disposed to consent. As Simone states,

in true love it is not we who love the afflicted in God; it is God in us who loves them. When we are in affliction, it is God in us who loves those who wish us well. Compassion and gratitude come down from God, and when they are exchanged in a glance, God is present at the point where the eyes of those who give and those who receive meet. The sufferer and the other love each other, starting from God, through God, but not for the love of God; they love each other for the love of the one for the other. This is an impossibility. That is why it comes about only through the agency of God.⁴⁵

Understanding the implications of this passage is a key to the further understanding of Simone Weil's concept of justice. When justice is viewed on the cosmic, supernatural scale of a virtue granted by God (i.e., Justice), then it becomes clear that humans cannot achieve this form of justice alone. How then is this justice achieved?

This new virtue, this higher justice, requires, according to Simone, a certain kind of madness—the madness of love—that is witnessed in the actions and in the thoughts that go against situations of power and oppression on the human level; when we take such contrary actions within the social order, we are labeled as “mad.”⁴⁶ Simone believes that we must cross the frontiers of the current social order, reject the bourgeois ethic, and defy the rights-based morality that is so prevalent today.

This madness is also divine. For Simone, madness can be likened to the stigmata, which allow a soul to bear witness to God incarnate, to the Crucified Love that died naked and nailed to the cross, arms spread wide to embrace the center of the universe. Thus, when Simone Weil asks, “Are we struggling for justice?” she is essentially asking how “mad” we are among our fellow human beings, how willing we are to prevent harm being done to other human beings, and how grateful we are to God, love, and justice. To the extent to which we fill these goals, we are mad with a madness that brings us closer to God, and as such, we are engaged in the struggle for justice.⁴⁷

For Simone, madness is a passion for love and justice—a passion that believes that, without love and justice, we succeed in banishing God from our realm. What we need, Simone writes,

is for the spirit of justice to dwell within us. The spirit of justice is nothing other than the supreme and perfect flower of the madness of love. . . . The madness of love draws one to discern and cherish equally, in all human milieu

⁴⁵ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 151.

⁴⁶ Bell, *Simone Weil*, 69.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

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[*sic*] without exception, in all parts of the globe, the fragile earthly possibilities of beauty, of happiness and of fulfillment; to want to preserve them all with an equally religious care; and where they are absent to want to rekindle tenderly the smallest traces of those which have existed, the smallest seeds of those which can be born. . . . The madness of love . . . radiates irresistibly through accent, tone and manner, through all thoughts, all words and all actions, in all circumstances and without any exception.⁴⁸

This divine madness of love becomes, for Simone, the purest possible expression of the supernatural virtue of justice. Indeed, through this love, we are able to witness another's affliction, and feel the desire to help the person and to stop the pain. This "madness" draws us to love and cherish all human beings equally, to love truth, justice, and love, to love Christ, the cross, and the crucifixion, and most of all, to love the silence and the absence of God.

AFFLICTION AND THE ABSENT GOD

It is apparent that Simone Weil's conception of justice in society depends on faith. If an individual cannot understand that truth, justice, and love are one and the same and that these virtues exist outside our world and cannot be easily reached by human faculties, then one cannot, in her opinion, behave justly toward fellow beings. All those humans, however, who, through their behavior, unconditionally respect and love all beings (consciously or unconsciously) possess this faith. But what is faith? According to Simone, "faith is the experience that the intelligence is enlightened by love."⁴⁹ Such a sentence is perhaps at first confusing, as it moves from the uncertainty of faith toward the complexity of love. In order to further clarify this statement by defining love, we turn to George Grant's notion that "love is consent to the fact that there is authentic otherness"⁵⁰ and to Plato's argument that "we love otherness, not because it is other, but because it is beautiful. The beauty of others was believed to be an experience open to everyone, though in extraordinarily different forms, and as differing steps towards perfection."⁵¹ This beauty of otherness, of authentic otherness, becomes the basis for the above statement that "faith is the experience that the intelligence is enlightened by love." Implicit within these def-

⁴⁸ Weil, "Are We Struggling," 9; originally found in this form in Bell, *Simone Weil*, 74.

⁴⁹ George Grant, "Faith and the Multiversity (1986)," in Christian and Grant, *George Grant Reader*, 463. This quotation is originally from Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948). George Grant translated this quotation himself, page number unrecorded.

⁵⁰ Grant, "Faith and the Multiversity," 463.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 464.

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initions is the notion that what is other is to be loved, for it cannot be separated from the notion of what is good and what is beautiful. With this understanding, we can therefore know more about something through the mere act of loving it—a love that brings us closer to God.

Therefore, for Simone, justice cannot be separated from faith and love.⁵² This faith—or this love—as justice can be witnessed in the life and death of Jesus and within aspects of the Christian faith. While Simone herself refused to be baptized, she was deeply and spiritually connected to God, Christ, and the tradition of the cross.⁵³ With this understanding, the obligation to human beings (discussed previously) has as its basis the faith that every human being can rise above the self and obtain the impersonal, the transcendent realm, the world beyond. Thus, it has at its core the belief in a divine order beyond time and space, a notion that allows the just person to love and surrender to Christ and to God. As Simone writes, “the just man loves. He who is capable not only of listening but also of loving hears this silence as the word of god. The speech of created beings is with sounds. The word of God is silence. God’s secret word of love can be nothing else but silence. Christ is the silence of God. Just as there is no tree like the cross, so there is no harmony like the silence of God.”⁵⁴

How can this justice that is based in faith and love be manifest in this world? “What is this sort of justice? How can the imitation of God by man be possible? We have an answer. It is Christ.”⁵⁵ Simone believed passionately that Christ has been the only true manifestation of justice in the flesh in this world. It is from the example of Christ, through the affliction of his crucifixion, and from the image of the cross, that we can learn what it truly means to live a just life, and to truly accept, love, and even celebrate the absence of God.

This knowledge of affliction, of the cross, and of Christ are, for Simone, the keys of Christianity. This knowledge leads the soul to recognize that all its thoughts and feelings, its every action and attitude, are entirely at the mercy of circumstances. This belief that everything is entirely up to the mercy of circumstance is why Christ embodied the

⁵² Pétremont, *Simone Weil*, 500.

⁵³ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62. In the same letter to Father Perrin, Simone states that she cannot be baptized and enter the church because she does not desire to separate herself from those who are not a part of the church: “I remain beside all those things that cannot enter the Church, the universal repository, on account of those two little words. I remain beside them all the more because my own intelligence is numbered among them” (77). Later in the same letter: “The love of those things that are outside visible Christianity [the beauty of the art, science, and writings, of Greece, Egypt, ancient India and ancient China] keeps me outside the Church” (94–95).

⁵⁴ Weil, *On Science*, 197.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

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notion of denying oneself; it is through this denial, this understanding, and this affliction that one truly deserves to be his disciple. The challenge lies in maintaining truth, maintaining an orientation of the soul ever-upward, even in the absolute misery and depth of affliction. This is how Christ conquered the world: by simply being the Truth, and continuing to be the Truth, even when nailed to the cross, a spiritual slave, naked, afflicted, and forsaken.⁵⁶

If Christ accomplished this purity of flesh, then what is stopping individuals today from achieving justice in this world? How are we capable of achieving divine love, justice, and God's grace if God is believed never to be perfectly present here below on account of our flesh? Simone left us with an answer: through affliction—an affliction that recognizes the absence and the silence of God. It is through this affliction that we can overcome the fact that, because of our flesh, God can never be with us perfectly. It is through affliction that God's love and mercy brilliantly shine because God "can be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction. This is the only possibility of perfection for us on earth. That is why the Cross is our only hope."⁵⁷

Thus, for Simone, it is through affliction, and through the understanding of the cross, that we can behold the only pure example of unconditional love and grace. For, as Richard H. Bell (1998) writes, "the cross represents the divine intersection with the world—our only pure example of an unconditional love. The cross, in fact, is a sign of an incarnation where God, having taken leave of the world to allow humans to act, reenters by our consent."⁵⁸

What then are we to learn from the cross and the crucifixion of Christ? We can learn from his affliction—an affliction so deep and so tortured that it implored a "just man to cry out against God, a just man as perfect as human nature can be,"⁵⁹ an affliction so great that it produced the soul cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" As Simone writes, "if we remain at this point without ceasing to love, we end by touching something that is not affliction, not joy, something not of the senses, common to joy and sorrow: the very love of God."⁶⁰ Thus, affliction is the wound that we must carry within our soul in order to escape from wretchedness and be a vessel for God's grace, love, and justice.

We suffer affliction because God appears to be absent from us, cre-

⁵⁶ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁷ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 127.

⁵⁸ Bell, *Simone Weil*, 61.

⁵⁹ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 120.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 89.

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ating a horror that threatens (at times) to consume the soul. It is during this period of absence that the soul is tempted to give in to the darkness, to cease loving God, and thus, to cease loving at all. But this is not the correct path to reuniting with God's love: "The soul has to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world. . . . But if the soul stops loving it falls, even in this life, into something almost equivalent to hell."⁶¹

This knowledge of God's presence (even in his absence), while it does nothing to heal the pain suffered by the soul, allows us to feel quite certainly that God's love for us is the very substance of this affliction. It allows us the knowledge that we have the ability to love perfection itself through affliction, and that the condition of human misery on this earth is wholly bearable because God has granted humans his infinite mercy through this earthly life. As Simone writes, "already here below we receive the capacity for loving God and for representing him to ourselves with complete certainty as having the substance of real, eternal, perfect, and infinite joy. Through our fleshy veils we receive from above presages of eternity which are enough to efface all doubts on this subject."⁶² In short, we have intimations of eternity.

God created the world and all living beings through love and for love; he created beings capable of love by going the infinite distance of tearing himself asunder. As Simone described, "This supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion. Nothing can be further from God than that which has been made accursed."⁶³ It becomes clear that for Simone, the greatest distance from God is not sin (for sin is only the turning of the gaze in the wrong direction): it is at the foot of the cross, where humans, struck down by affliction, are left struggling with the infinite distance and the absence of God. Even at the foot of the cross, suffering the most extreme affliction, we humans still possess the ability and the choice (the obligation and responsibility?) to turn our gaze toward God unceasingly—even in the depths of pain—consenting, surrendering to his will, waiting to hear his word. In this moment,

extreme affliction . . . is a nail whose point is applied at the very centre of the soul, whose point is all necessity spreading throughout space and time. . . . He whose soul remains ever turned toward God though the nail pierces

⁶¹ Ibid., 121.

⁶² Ibid., 90.

⁶³ Ibid., 124.

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finds himself nailed to the very centre of the universe. It is the true centre; it is not in the middle; it is beyond space and time; it is God. In a dimension that does not belong to space, that is not time, that is indeed quite a different dimension, this nail has pierced cleanly through all creation, through the thickness of the screen, separating the soul from God.⁶⁴

How does this affliction and this understanding of the absence of God lead us to love (and Love) and thus to justice (and Justice)? According to Simone, before all things, God is love, and God loves himself. As Simone understood, the love between God and God, which in itself is God, is the bond that separates the infinite distance between man and God, between the cross and the word.⁶⁵ Yet, how are we to seek him? How are we to go toward him? Why should we attempt to surmount this infinite barrier? It is because of this divine love that we must seek, must surrender and consent to God, waiting for his mercy and his grace, waiting for his truth and justice to enter into the vessel that is our flesh, to take possession of our very soul. For, if God comes quietly to possess us, he leaves behind a little seed, to be grown and nurtured in our soul. When the seed matures, the soul truly belongs to God, truly consents to his will, and truly and effectively loves; thus, we possess at this moment the infinite bond of God. The love (and Love) within our soul then is divine and uncreated for it is the love of God for God that is existing within us. It is through this embodiment, this love, that we allow God to work through us, to love through us, and become the personification of justice in our flesh.

What if our flesh fails? For, "it does sometimes happen that the flesh turns us away from God, but often when we think this has happened it is really the other way round. The soul being unable to bear the deadly presence of God, that searing flame, takes refuge behind the flesh and uses it like a screen. In this case it is not the flesh which makes us forget God, it is the soul which tries to forget God by burying itself within the flesh."⁶⁶

Since it is the soul that is attempting to forget God by hiding beneath the flesh, then it is the soul toward which we must turn our focus and our attention in order to reach the state of surrender and justice. In order to reorient the soul back to God, it is only necessary to recognize that through love, the soul may be rescued from affliction. This love is a direction toward the Divine, an avenue to surrender to God's will and his word. The soul which remains turned ever upward toward God,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 134–35.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 126.

⁶⁶ Weil, *On Science*, 156.

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though it may find itself nailed to the arms of the cross, hanging at the intersection of the Creator and the created, discovers that at the center of the arms of the universe, beyond time and space, is God. As Simone so beautifully illumines:

In this marvellous dimension, the soul, without leaving the place and the instant where the body to which it is united is situated, can cross the totality of space and time and come into the very presence of God. It is at the intersection of creation and its Creator. This point of intersection is the point of intersection of the arms of the Cross. Saint Paul was perhaps thinking about things of this kind when he said: "That ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge."⁶⁷

TOWARD A CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the notion of justice (and thus Justice) to Simone Weil is the notion of responsibility and obligation to fellow beings and the acceptance of an eternal order that exists beyond time and space: an order that exists an infinite distance from humans that can be bridged only through affliction and the surrender to the love of God. It is in this action of consent that the absent God will seek and possess us, filling us with his love and truth, allowing justice to pass through our soul and manifest in this earthly flesh. It is love between God and God that lifts us up from the depths of affliction and suffering, up from the foot of the cross, and yields to us the mysteries of the universe. The final crown of this life of affliction, of waiting, of surrendering, and of consent, is the moment of utter holiness and despair when one becomes like Christ, a spiritual slave, naked and abandoned, nailed to the cross, crying out to the universe, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Once nailed to this cross, with the nail of necessity piercing our hearts, deceit and impurity are no longer possible. It is at this moment that we can offer our final vestiges of the self upward, waiting for the absent God to enter into our flesh so that God's divine love and justice "may pass unimpeded through the space we once occupied, close again on Itself. 'We are created for this consent, and for this alone.'"⁶⁸ It is at this moment that we are forced to turn our eyes, our hearts, and our souls ever upward toward God, yielding ourselves to spiritual poverty, spiritual nakedness, and even death itself: thus yielding to God's

⁶⁷ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 137–38; Paul's quote is from Eph. 3:17–19.

⁶⁸ Leslie Fielder, "Introduction," in Weil, *Waiting for God*, 38–39, partly citing Weil.

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truth, justice, and love. It is with an ultimate “Yes, thy will be done,” that we offer up the final vestiges of the self, surrendering completely to the will of God, destroying our selves and our egos, creating a vacuous container in the space that was once impeded by the notion of “I,” so that the divine love may pass unimpeded through the space that this “I” once occupied.⁶⁹ If one maintains this consent, this surrender, this constant attention toward grace, “what [we] will discover buried deep under the sound of [our] own lamentations is the pearl of the silence of God.”⁷⁰

One of Simone’s lasting gifts to spiritual and intellectual thought is her reclamation and revival of the notion of human responsibilities and obligations (rather than simply human rights), presented not in a negative light as is often the case in current times, but in a positive and spiritual light—a divine duty to God, to fellow beings, and to our innermost self. This is where I believe Simone’s true and lasting lessons in justice lie—by returning to responsibilities and obligations through attention, consent, love, and affliction, Simone is showing us the way to true justice, and giving us a spiritual road map to manifest this Justice in society by allowing ourselves to be transformed by love and by the silence and the absence of God.

Simone herself could also serve as an example of the just human, the spiritual slave, the afflicted soul who never ceased offering her attention upward, patiently waiting for the moment in which she could be reunited with, and consumed by, God’s grace and mercy. Simone was “a spirit almost completely released from the flesh, a spirit who was the Word.”⁷¹ Simone, like Christ, offered the world a source of light through her life and her thoughts that is bright enough to illumine misery and suffering with divine love, even sixty-five years after her death, for she loved truth (and Truth) to the point of facing affliction rather than escaping to the depths of spiritual falsehood. Above all, she loved God and his order. As Simone states, “If I had my eternal salvation placed in front of me on this table, and if I only had to stretch out my hand to take it, I would not put out my hand so long as I had not thought I had received the order to do so.”⁷²

Perhaps, in the turmoil of modern times, we can turn our eyes toward the example of the just life that Simone Weil left for us: a life of genius, “of a kind of genius akin to that of saints.”⁷³ It is this genius

⁶⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁰ Weil, *On Science*, 198.

⁷¹ Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 525.

⁷² Ibid., 452.

⁷³ T. S. Eliot, “Preface,” in Simone Weil, *Need for Roots*, vi.

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coupled with justness that has caused many academics and authors such as George Grant, Simone Pétrement, and T. S. Eliot to refer to Simone Weil as a saint. Simone understood the problem of spiritual emptiness, affliction, and the soul's yearning for God, perhaps better than any other writer of the twentieth century, and she worked, wrote, and lived to change it, dedicating her life to offering her soul to God and her genius to humankind. Like Christ, it is in her death that her legacy has gained recognition and importance: her thoughts, her passions, and her theologies have been published posthumously, illuminating her readers to a world beyond time and space, an eternal order that houses the absent God—a God that is waiting for humanity to surrender, to consent to his will and his way so that he may fill their souls with divine love, allowing justice to manifest in the earthly flesh and the earthly realm. With the mark of a genius, Simone dedicated her life to understanding God and humans, leaving behind her a prolific intellectual, political, spiritual, and transcendent body of writing and thought.

In perhaps a great act of foreshadowing, Simone wrote a letter to Father Perrin in May of 1942, describing to him what type of person she believed the world needed in the present and in the future (and describing no one better than herself). If anything, Simone herself represents these words to the fullest: an academic, a teacher, a worker, a revolutionary, a genius, and a saint: truly a unique soul, fit to stand as an image and an inspiration in the spiritual wasteland of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: "Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself also without precedent. . . . The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors. Where there is a need there is also an obligation."⁷⁴ And where there is obligation, there is responsibility.

⁷⁴ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 99.