The Philosophy of Simone Weil

Course Guide 2016/2017

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Office Hour: Tuesday 4-5
Course Secretary: Sam Bell, sam.bell@ed.ac.uk

Course Overview

This course considers the philosophical aspects of the thinking of Simone Weil, the twentieth-century writer best known for her spiritual writings. However, Simone Weil was trained in philosophy, taught philosophy, and always returned to a philosophical method in her thinking. She is not a theologian because she is not mainly interested in God’s account of creation or His intercession in the world, not least because her vision is of a divine abdication or self-removal from the world.

We will examine her mature philosophical thought by reading some of her essays from 1940-1943 (except in week 4 when our readings are from 1934 and 1937). Weil offers a philosophically radical account of the nature of a human person in its capacity to think, act, contemplate, etc. This account in turn leads to her consideration of the nature of labour, work, force, love, study and the needs of the soul. Her ideas in this area flow from her rejection of Descartes’ account of human beings. Though she is a modern thinker, she is influenced by Plato, especially in her account of the political sphere. There, her interest in justice, politics, society and our needs are defined by considering the nature of a human person, not the body politic. Our abiding focus will be her essay masterwork, known usually as “Human Personality.” In the last week we will consider her impact on subsequent thinkers, especially Iris Murdoch.

Requirements

The format of this course is a seminar. It requires your participation. There is no required text for this course. Each week there are one or two required readings indicated below.

☞ You must read these articles or chapters in preparation for discussion each week.

The discussion in class is no substitute for reading this material carefully. The readings are deceptively difficult and not like ordinary journal articles in philosophy. Where the reading is not online through the library, I will put electronic copies on LEARN.
Assessment

Exam
This course will be assessed solely on the basis of an exam given in the April/May 2017 diet of examinations.

Coursework Dissertation
Students who qualify (usually fourth year single honours philosophy students) may submit a Coursework Dissertation instead of sitting the exam. Coursework Dissertations are submitted online on 25 April 2016 by 12pm, please check with the departmental office for further details. The title of your short dissertation must be approved in advance by submitting it to me in person or by email. Generally, any question listed below for discussion in a seminar is a suitable short dissertation title.

Formative essay
In addition, anyone can submit an essay of 2000 words to me for assessment and comment. This “formative essay” will not count toward determining your mark for this class or the class of degree you are ultimately awarded. However the essay is an excellent opportunity to improve your philosophical writing and try arguments you may ultimately use in the exam or short dissertation. I strongly urge you to submit this essay. If you submit the essay by the end of teaching week 9, I will return it to you in class in teaching week 11. If you submit the essay by the end of teaching week 11, I will return the essay to you no later than week 1 of the exam term. Essays can be sent to me by email.

MSc Assessment
MSc students are assessed by a single essay of 2500 words. The title of your essay must be approved in advance by submitting it to me in person or by email.

Visiting Student Assessment
Visiting students will be assessed by exam as described above for home students.

Contacts
You may contact me by email at david.levy@ed.ac.uk. My office is in room 5.10 of the Dugald Stewart Building. I am available Tuesday of each week from 4 until 5 to discuss more or less any philosophical topic, related to this course or not. To ensure that I can see you, I ask that you send me an email confirming that you intend to visit and advising me of the topic for discussion. Unfortunately, I am not often available at other times, though you can seek a special arrangement to meet if it proves necessary.

If you have questions about the mechanics of submitting assignments, exam timetables and other logistical matters please contact the course secretary, Sam Bell.

Miscellaneous
Regrettably, the behaviour of some obliges me to to make the following requests.
Please do not text during class. It is disrespectful. Turn off the ringer of your phone and put the phone away.

Please do not use your laptop computers in class for anything besides making notes or related activity. If I notice that you are using your laptop for something potentially distracting to your neighbours such as Facebook or YouTube, I will ask you to close your laptop. Tweeting is not a related activity no matter how interesting the seminar material.

Our Motto
“To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts ... but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates ... It is to solve some of the problems of life, not just theoretically, but practically.”
—Henry David Thoreau, Walden

**Weekly Readings**
Please read both readings where two are indicated. Note that the reading in week 5 on the *Iliad* is quite long, so begin early.

**Abbreviations for books:**

*Week 1:* No reading, consider reading a biographical summary in one of the texts below or above.


Week 7: (i) “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations” in AA, SE, SW; (ii) and “The Needs of the Soul” especially the first half dozen or so pages up to ‘Order’ available in AA and as Part One of Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a declaration of duties to mankind*, Routledge, 1952.


**General Reading**

There is no single, philosophy textbook on Weil’s philosophy. The closest thing is:


A good general book on Weil by an analytic philosopher is:


An eccentric, short, yet masterful book on Weil’s thought is:


There are many books that are biographies of varying kinds, among which the most comprehensive is by Weil’s friend, Simone Petrement. Any is likely to be interesting—though unnecessary for this course—except the one by du Plessix Gray, which I do not recommend.

Much of the philosophical underpinnings of Weil’s thought are more or less explicit in these notes made by her students in her classes on philosophy:


The single richest book of secondary literature in a familiar philosophical idiom is:


If you read French, then you will find that many of the original essays can be found online by searching here:  http://classiques.uqac.ca/
Additional Books by Simone Weil
This list is not exhaustive in conjunction with those mentioned above, but this covers the large bulk of those available in English.

Secondary Reading and Questions

Week 1: Introduction


Week 2: Human Personality


**Week 3: Reading and Value**


Bell, Richard (ed). *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 1993. [Chapter 4, 5, 6]


**Week 4: Oppression and the Power of Words**

Bell, Richard (ed.). *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 1993. [Chapter 4]
White, George Abbott (ed.), *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1981. [Chapter by White]

**Week 5: The Iliad**

*The Iliad or the poem of force: A Critical Edition*, ed. James Holoka, Peter Lang, 2003 [This has a section by section reading and commentary on the Weil’s essay, with the French text included.]
Rozelle-Stone, A. Rebecca and Lucian Stone, eds. The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later. United Kingdom: T.& T.Clark, 2009.[Esp. chapter 10]
Doering, Jane E. Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force. University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. [Be careful, this interpretation is problematic]
Meaney, Marie Cabaud, Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretations of Ancient Greek Texts, Oxford University Press, 2007.[Esp. chapters 1 and 5]
White, George Abbott (ed.), Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life, University of Massachusetts Press, 1981. [Chapters by Ferber and Summers]
Irwin, Alexander, Saints of the impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the politics of the sacred, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.[Esp. chapters 2 & 5]

**Week 6: Affliction and Dignity of Labour**

Bell, Richard (ed). Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity. Cambridge University Press, 1993.[Esp. chapters 1-3 & 11, 12]

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**Week 7: Human Obligations and the Needs of the Soul**

Bell, Richard (ed). *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 1993. [Esp. chapters 7, 9, 10]
White, George Abbott (ed.), *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1981. [Chapter by O’Brien]


**Week 8: Legitimacy**

Bell, Richard (ed). *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 1993. [Chapter 10]


**Week 9: Justice**

Bell, Richard (ed). *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 1993. [Chapter 9]


Week 10: Human Personality redux

See week 2 above.

Week 11: Weil’s Philosophy and Murdoch’s “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”

These writings give a sense of the relation Weil saw between her ideas and the prevailing ideas of the natural or material world in our scientific age.

Rozelle-Stone, A. Rebecca and Lucian Stone, eds. The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later. United Kingdom: T.& T.Clark, 2009. [Esp. chapters 6, 7, 8]

These writings are direct discussions of Weil’s influence on Murdoch.


Questions for essays and exams

These are questions you can use as starting points for your formative essays, coursework dissertations, and class essays. They are also examples of the kinds of questions that will appear on section B of the exam.

1. What is the personal/impersonal distinction for Weil?
2. Why, for Weil, are rights inadequate as a basis for our deference to people?
3. Can we respect someone’s personality?
4. Can a collective think according to Weil? Is she right?
5. Is Weil’s notion of reading a distinctive concept? If not, to what is it similar?
6. In what ways is Weil’s notion of reading like perception?
7. Does reading imply value?
8. Why, for Weil, can values not be placed in a hierarchy?
9. Why does Weil think all philosophy concerns solely contradictions?
10. What is the point of philosophy for Weil?
11. How does Weil refine the Marxist account of oppression?
12. What is the role of power in Weil’s account of oppression?
13. What is the power words have? How does this relate to “empty words”?
14. How does la force/might produce mindlessness?
15. What does Weil think the relationship between la force/might and necessity is?
16. For Weil, is la force/might violence for the threat of violence?
17. What is affliction for Weil?
18. Does affliction have a point or purpose?
19. What is the first condition for non-servile labor according to Weil? Is she right?
20. What is a need of the soul? What makes it a need?
21. Should government concern itself with the needs of the soul?
22. What does Weil mean by “soul”? Is its existence open to empirical proof or disproof?
23. For Weil, is there a distinction between the social and political?
24. What is the legitimate role of government for Weil?
25. Is Justice a political or moral notion?
26. What relationship, if any, is there between justice, good and evil?
27. What is “the just balance”?
28. What is ‘God’ for Weil and Murdoch? Does it play the same role in their philosophies?
29. Don’t obligations follow from rights?
30. Do we have an obligation to care and respect human beings?
These are examples of topics that could appear in section A of the exam.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affliction</th>
<th>Force</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Justice</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Oppression</td>
<td>Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs of the Soul</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>God/Good</td>
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**Format of the Exam**
The exam consists of two sections, A and B. Section A will have two topics. Section B will have eight essay questions. The exam is two hours. In the exam, you must write an essay on one topic from section A or two essays that answer two questions in section B. To be clear, you either write one essay for two hours on a topic selected from section A or two essays in answer to two questions in section B.

You cannot write about a topic in section A and section B.

**Specimen Exam**

**Section A**
1. Personal
2. Justice

**Section B**
1. Can a collective think according to Weil? Is she right?
2. In what ways is Weil’s notion of reading like perception?
3. Why does Weil think all philosophy concerns solely contradictions?
4. What is the role of power in Weil’s account of oppression?
5. For Weil, is la force/might violence for the threat of violence?
6. Does affliction have a point or purpose?
7. Should government concern itself with the needs of the soul?
8. What is ‘God’ for Weil and Murdoch? Does it play the same role in their philosophies?