The Philosophy of Simone Weil

Course Guide 2019/2020

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Office Hour: Tuesday 3-4 p.m.
Course Secretary: Ann-Marie Cowe, annmarie.cowe@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 takes Plato as her starting point. Her political 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 by considering her impact on Iris Murdoch.

Requirements
The format of this course is a weekly seminar focused on interpreting Weil’s writings. It requires your participation, there are no outlines of course content to share, though I will give you mind maps as aids to revision. Each week there are one or two required readings indicated below. I will discuss the readings in the seminar where your questions can be in relation to the text. Please bring the texts to the seminars. Review the essay questions at the end of this guide to prompt your thinking about the text.

☞ You must read the articles/chapters given on page 3 below for the corresponding week, in advance, in preparation for our discussion in the seminar.

The discussion in class is no substitute for reading this material carefully. The readings are deceptively difficult; are not like ordinary journal articles in philosophy; and require effort to reconstruct the arguments. 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 December 2019 diet of examinations. See the note about formative assessment below.
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, please check with the Teaching Office for further details on submission. The title of your 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 assessment
In addition, everyone should submit two exam answers from last year’s exam—available from the Library online. These can be e-mailed to me at any point within the term. This “formative exam” will not count toward determining your mark for this class or the class of degree you are ultimately awarded. However the formative exam 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 two formative exam essays. If you submit your essays by the end of teaching week 9, I will return them 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 as soon as I can. All formative work will receive feedback, comments, and an indicative mark.

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 3 until 4 p.m. to discuss more or less any philosophical topic, related to this course or not. To ensure that I can see you, I prefer 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 please 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, Ann-Marie Cowe.

Lecture Recording
I will not our record seminars using the central University recording facility. You may record our seminars for your own revision. Please do not put any recordings online or share them with anyone outside the course. Any student should feel able to ask questions and discuss points in our classroom without concern for whether these will be shared or broadcast. If you are unable to attend class, please contact me and I will endeavour to record the class for you. If you want to review a class you attended, please contact me as I might have a recording to share with you.

Miscellaneous
Regrettably, the behaviour of some obliges me 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 an urgent or 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 somewhat long, so begin early.

Abbreviations for books:
LPW = Simone Weil: Late philosophical writings, ed. Eric Springsted, University of Notre Dame Press, 2015.

Week 1: No reading, consider reading a biographical summary in one of the texts below or above, or review some of the background philosophical reading.


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. Other introductions with biographical material are listed below as additional readings for Week 1.

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/

In 2019, Oxford Bibliographies Online, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com, will publish a bibliography of Simone Weil’s work.

**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**

These additional readings are useful as background. For background each week, consider one or two extra readings. For an essay, consider four or more.

**Week 1: Introduction**


It is useful to re-acquaint yourself with some important works to which Weil was responding, specifically:

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, especially Meditation II; or *Principles of First Philosophy*, especially Part I, Art. 7.
Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

**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**


**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.]


Doering, Jane E. *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. [Be careful, this interpretation is problematic]


White, George Abbott (ed.), *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1981. [Chapters by Ferber and Summers]


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]


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


**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]

Springsted, Eric, “‘Thou hast given me room’: Simone Weil’s Retheologization of the Political,” in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, 20, 1997, 87–98.

**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

You can use these questions as starting points for your formative essays and coursework dissertations. These are also examples of what will appear on the exam in section B.

1. What kind of distinction is the personal/impersonal distinction for Weil? Is the distinction sound?
2. Why, for Weil, are rights inadequate as a basis for our deference or obligations to people?
3. Can we respect someone’s personality?
4. To what extent do collectives have thoughts or 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. To what extent and in what ways does Weil’s notion of reading imply value(s)?
8. Why, for Weil, can values not be placed in a hierarchy?
9. Why does Weil think all philosophy concerns solely contradictions? Is this problematic?
10. What is the point of philosophy for Weil? Critically consider her conception of philosophy.
11. How does Weil alter the Marxist account of oppression? Does this make it better?
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 according to Weil? Is it plausible?
15. What does Weil think the relationship between la force/might and necessity is?
16. For Weil, is la force/might violence or the threat of violence?
17. What is affliction for Weil? How does it occur? How is it remedied?
18. Does affliction have a point or purpose for Weil? Is her account plausible?
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? To what extent is this distinction actual?
24. What is the legitimate role of government for Weil? Compare with alternative ideas of the role of government?
25. To what extent 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”? How does it relate the natural world to the supernatural?
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.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affliction</th>
<th>Force</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Justice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Oppression</td>
<td>Rights</td>
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<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 concerns itself with the needs of the soul?
8. What is ‘God’ for Weil and Murdoch? Does it play the same role in their philosophies?