Sacrifice and Obedience. Simone Weil on the Binding of Isaac

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Abstract

Sacrifice and obedience are two concepts that are central to the thinking of the French philosopher Simone Weil. She does not always relate these concepts, and even in her references to the Akedah – the “binding of Isaac”, the story in Genesis 22 – where one would expect both concepts to occur, she only makes the connection between them in a split way: She focuses on the sacrificial aspect in one entry in her Cahiers, and on obedience in another.

In Gen. 22 God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Weil refers to this narrative only very rarely; those two of these mentions that will be addressed in this paper seem very different at first glance – not least because one is about sacrifice, the other about obedience – but it will eventually become apparent that, from Simone Weil's point of view, they belong together in a systematic way.

Keywords

Simone Weil – sacrifice – obedience – binding of Isaac – Akedah – Genesis 22
1 Introduction

Sacrifice and obedience are two concepts that are central to the thinking of the French philosopher Simone Weil. She often places “sacrifice” in the Christian context of Jesus’ death on the cross, but she also treats it against the background of sacrificial practices in Hinduism. To the term “obedience” Weil gives a meaning of its own, partly quite different from the usual. She does not always relate these concepts, and even in her references to the Akedah – the story in Genesis 22 – where one would expect both concepts to occur, she only makes the connection between them in a split way: She focuses on the sacrificial aspect in one entry in her Cahiers, and on obedience in another.

The 22nd chapter of the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible contains the narrative – the “binding of Isaac” – in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham obeys and sets about sacrificing Isaac. At the last moment, a messenger of God appears and stops Abraham. Abraham then sees a ram and sacrifices it instead of Isaac. Weil refers to this narrative only very rarely; two of these references that will be addressed extensively in this paper seem very different at first glance – not least because one is about sacrifice (see section 2), the other about obedience (section 3) – but it will eventually become apparent that, from Simone Weil’s point of view, they belong together in a systematic way (section 4).

2 Sacrifice: “Sacrifice d’Abraham. Quoi de plus complet comme vide?”

When Simone Weil notes this in her fourth diary, she does so in a context in which there is otherwise no mention of Abraham far and wide. Neither do

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1 Weil was not only a philosopher, but also a mathematician, a mystic, and at times – in a certain sense – a Marxist. For an introduction see, e.g., Bell, Simone Weil, or Plant, Simone Weil.
2 Her understanding of sacrifice has also been subject to comparisons with other authors; see, e.g., McDade, Simone Weil and Gerard Manley Hopkins on God, Affliction, Necessity and Sacrifice.
3 The topic of the Eucharistic sacrifice in Weil has attracted some attention in the secondary literature, see, e.g., Loades, Eucharistic Sacrifice: Simone Weil’s Use of a Liturgical Metaphor; Novoa Echaurren, El Sacrificio como clave de unidad en la obra de Simone Weil; Wolfteich, Attention or Destruction: Simone Weil and the Paradox of the Eucharist.
4 See, e.g., Weil, Cahiers 1, p. 321 (K3, ms. 62) and p. 328 (K3, ms. 70).
6 Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 138 (K4, ms. 108): “Abraham’s sacrifice. What could be more complete as regards void?” (Weil, Notebooks, p. 137).
the references to Sophocles, Ovid, Valéry, etc. on the pages before and after provide the basis for an understanding. Yet the setting of the quotation offers one support: le vide. “Le vide produit une angoisse, une révolte désespérée; puis, par effet de l’épuisement, résignation, mais avec perte du sens du réel, mort partielle, souvent mensonge intérieur; et étalement, émiettement du temps”,7 Weil continues. This description of Abraham coincides in only one feature with the actual narrative in Genesis 22: the “étalement du temps” – the dispersal, expansion of time. This “étalement du temps” happens on the outside; so many things happen in the story: Abraham saddles a donkey, gets two men to accompany him, cuts the wood for the burnt offering, walks for three days, talks to Isaac, builds an altar and lays the wood there, binds Isaac.8 On the other hand, the fact that all this is deliberately done by Abraham before he raises his hand to kill Isaac indicates that time expands inside him as well.9 All the other descriptions of states of mind given by Weil – such as anguish, desperate revolt, etc. – attribute, in Kierkegaardian fashion, to Abraham what he must have felt or should have felt (they are not reports of what, according to Genesis 22, happened); they also show, however, her interest in what is going on in Abraham.

The activities described now amount to generating a void; the void, which produces all the anxiety, rebellion, and resignation, emerges continuously, hand in hand with the deeds.10 When Abraham offers Isaac to God – in a long process – he intends to give and is already giving a lot, more than he thinks he can get back, thus letting a void grow within himself. A few paragraphs earlier, Weil comments on situations of this kind, in general terms:

Nécessité d’une récompense, pour l’équilibre; de recevoir l’équivalent de ce qu’on donne […] ; mais si, faisant violence à cette nécessité forte comme la pesanteur, on laisse un vide, il se produit comme un appel

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7 Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 138 (K4, ms. 109): “The void produces an anguish, a desperate revolt, followed, as a result of exhaustion, by resignation; but with a loss of the sense of reality, involving partial death, often inward untruthfulness, and a dispersal, a cutting up of time.” (Weil, Notebooks, p. 137).
9 Lissa McCullough notes regarding this passage: “Confrontation with the void is not an outwardly visible struggle but an interior uprooting and transformation: the soul consents to be delivered into the nothingness in which God is absolute master and grace takes command.” (McCullough, The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil, p. 192)
10 It is, however, important to note that, according to Epicure, “le vide est un bien” (Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 226).
d’air, et une récompense surnaturelle survient. Elle ne vient pas si on a un autre salaire ; ce vide la fait venir.11

This description fits the Akedah exactly: Isaac can certainly be understood as a supernatural reward. Not only is it – he, Isaac – given to Abraham by a messenger of God, it is also something Abraham was supposed not to count on (and Isaac had always been a supernatural gift).12 And, without a doubt, this reward is a grace. “La grâce comble, mais elle ne peut entrer que là où il y a un vide pour la recevoir, et c’est elle aussi qui fait ce vide”,13 Weil says some time later. It is a grace, and the void that makes this grace possible is made by grace: Isaac is given by God in order to be given (back) and to be given again. (Jean-Luc Marion has drawn attention to a similar structure, the “gift in a phenomenological sense”).14

A void arises in a second way and in a second sense, which integrates into the following characterisation given by Weil not much after the remark about Abraham:

Pesanteur – […] D’es bienfaits modérés qui laissent l’obligé dans l’impuissance et la dépendance à l’égard du bienfaiteur provoquent la reconnaissance ; un bienfait assez grand pour élever au-dessus d’une telle dépendance n’en provoque pas, ou fort brève, et risque de provoquer une rancune, parce que l’obligation implique la nécessité, de continuer indéfiniment à donner sans plus rien recevoir en échange, autrement dit un vide. (Déséquilibre, en ce cas, entre la durée du bienfait, c’est-à-dire un moment, et celle, indéfinie, de la reconnaissance ; au lieu que le bienfait moindre en quantité, mais prolongé indéfiniment dans le temps, pour l’imagination, par la possibilité de bienfaits nouveaux, ne comporte pas un tel déséquilibre.)15

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11 Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 136 (K4, ms. 106): “Need of a reward, for the sake of balance; need to receive the equivalent of what one has given […]; but if, doing violence to this need, powerful as gravity, we leave a void, there takes place as it were an inrush of air, and a supernatural reward supervenes. It does not come if we receive any other wages; it is this void which causes it to come.” (Weil, Notebooks, p. 135)

12 He is the child of the 90-year-old Sarah, the origin of an entire people of descendants promised by God (see Gen. 15:4f, 17:4–19, 21:1–7).

13 Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 286 (K6, ms. 3): “Grace fills, but it can only enter where there is a void waiting to receive it, a void for whose creation it is itself responsible.” (Weil, Notebooks, p. 198)

14 See Marion, Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice.

15 Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 139 et seq. (K4, ms. 110): “Gravity. – […] Thus moderate favours which leave the person obliged in a powerless and dependent position with respect to the
When God returns Isaac to Abraham, Abraham has received more than he can ever repay. A void is thus created firstly – as we have seen – by Abraham setting out to sacrifice Isaac, and secondly by God “giving” or leaving Isaac to him in Genesis 22:12, thus placing Abraham in a situation where he must keep on giving without ever being able to give enough.

He stands in the perpetual duty “to give (back) without ever being able to receive anything in exchange” (“à donner sans plus rien recevoir en échange”) – for what more could God give him? In the form of Isaac, the tribal father Abraham has received everything that constitutes him; the resulting void is complete. It is this second-order movement, this second emptying – after the one that Abraham generated on his way to sacrificing Isaac – which makes the void complete (“Quoi de plus complet comme vide?”).

That Weil conceives of completions as second-order movements is not unusual, as can be seen, for example, in her concept of creation: “La création est faite du mouvement descendant de la pesanteur, du mouvement ascendant de la grâce et du mouvement descendant de la grâce à la deuxième puissance [...]”16 There seems to be only an analogy between this example and the void in Abraham, insofar as both represent second-order movements; in terms of content, they seem to have nothing to do with each other, especially since creation is commonly considered to be exactly the opposite of letting a void come into being. Nina Heinsohn, however, explains in her book about Weil’s concept of “attention”: “[Weil] interpretierte [...] den göttlichen Schöpfungsakt maßgeblich als Entleerung. [...] A]uch der Mensch [sei] dazu aufgerufen, sich seiner falschen Göttlichkeit zu entleeren’ und die göttliche Entleerung mithin zu imitieren”,17 and she quotes a phrase of Weil: “[s]e vider de sa fausse divinité, se

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16 Weil, Cahiers 3, p. 65 (K8, ms. 33): “Creation is made up of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace, and the descending movement of grace raised to the second power [...]” Weil, Notebooks, p. 388.

17 Heinsohn, Simone Weils Konzept der attention, p. 188: “Weil interpreted the divine act of creation decisively as ‘emptying’. Man, too, was called upon to ‘empty himself of his false divinity’ and thus to imitate the divine emptying.”
nier soi-même, renoncer à être en imagination le centre du monde [...]”\textsuperscript{18} All these considerations make it clear that the completeness of the void that Weil ascribes to Abraham’s sacrifice is a completeness in the sense of an end point of a process, not in the sense of a spontaneous totality.

Before we turn to the second passage in which Weil mentions Genesis 22 and which we would like to discuss, let us make one more comment: It is remarkable that this sacrifice qua creation of a void seems to manage entirely without an order. It almost appears as if Abraham would sacrifice \textit{on his own} – this observation will become relevant in section 4.

3 Order and Obedience: “Le sacrifice d’Iphigénie fait pendant au sacrifice d’Isaac, comme le mal au bien. C’est à la fois violence et désobéissance”

Simone Weil wrote this sentence\textsuperscript{19} in her diary in 1942, about half a year later than the quotation discussed in the previous section. Although it needs to be clarified what Weil means by the terms that occur, the logic of this passage seems clear to us: Since the two sacrifices are like evil to good – that is, they are opposite poles\textsuperscript{20} – and Weil ascribes cruelty and disobedience to the sacrifice of Iphigenia, neither cruelty nor disobedience are to be found in the Akedah.

Even before one can seriously consider what she might have meant here, the question arises: to which \textit{Iphigenia} is she referring? The Iphigenia Plays by Euripides\textsuperscript{21} and Racine\textsuperscript{22} are possible candidates\textsuperscript{23} because both poets are often mentioned by Weil. Here is Euripides’ version: Agamemnon kills animals at the farmers’ and thereby also kills the sacred stag in the grove of the goddess Artemis before the eyes of the seer Kalchas. When the Greek army is then on its way to Troy under Agamemnon’s leadership, Artemis causes a calm and makes the continuation of the journey impossible. Kalchas prophesies that the goddess will only lift the calm when the Greeks have sacrificed Iphigenia.

\textsuperscript{18} Weil, \textit{Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu}, p. 300: “[t]o empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the center of the world in imagination [...].” Weil, \textit{Formes of the Implicit Love of God}, p. 100.

\textsuperscript{19} Weil, \textit{Cahiers 3}, p. 275 (κ10, ms. 36): “The sacrifice of Iphigenia forms the pendant to that of Isaac, as evil does to good. It is at the same time both violence and disobedience.” Weil, \textit{Notebooks}, p. 561.

\textsuperscript{20} Note the definite articles in “le mal au bien”.

\textsuperscript{21} Euripides, \textit{Iphigenia in Aulis}.

\textsuperscript{22} Racine, \textit{Iphigenia}.

\textsuperscript{23} The Iphigenia drama by Aeschylus is lost; the one by Sophocles is a fragment (frg. 305–308) that does not contain anything that is relevant here. See Sophocles, \textit{Iphigeneia}.
Agamemnon is determined to sacrifice his daughter for Greece; Achilles wants to prevent the sacrifice; Iphigenia finally declares that she is willing to die for Greece. She is then adorned and consecrated for sacrifice. At the end of the play, a messenger arrives and tells Clytemnestra, Iphigenia's mother the following:

Then suddenly there was a wonder to see. Every man heard distinctly the sound of the blow but, as to the girl, she disappeared – where to, no one knew. The priest cried out, and all the army echoed his shout, when they saw the unexpected portent sent by some god, past belief even for one who saw it: a deer was lying on the ground, gasping, a magnificent creature beautiful to the eye, whose blood was sprinkled all over the goddess' altar. Then Calchas spoke – you can imagine with what joy: “You kings of this united army of Greeks, do you see this victim that the goddess has laid before her altar, this deer that runs the hills? She welcomes this offering as far more to her liking than the girl, so that her altar may not be defiled by noble blood. Gladly she has accepted this sacrifice, and she grants us a favourable voyage for launching our attack on Ilium. […]

And he emphasises, “your daughter has been wafted up to the gods – no doubt of it!” This ending does not fit very well, at least at first glance, with Weil's statement that there is a difference between – even an antithesis of – the consecrating or binding of Iphigenia and that of Isaac. She claims that the Iphigenia drama, unlike the sacrifice of Isaac, is characterised by violence and disobedience (“C’est à la fois violence et désobéissance.”). Euripides version of the plot, however, does without violence – without the sacrifice of a human being –, just like Genesis 22, and the substitution by an animal actually brings the plots very close to each other.

When speaking of the Euripides version of the drama, though, the following must be said about it:

Most important, the ending of the play is certainly not Euripidean: the authentic text probably ends with Iphigenia's exit at 1509. [... T]he ending we have has numerous defects (including linguistic and metrical errors which cannot possibly be the work of Euripides or any competent dramatist of the fifth or fourth century BC): it must be a much later composition. There is also external evidence that a different ending (Euripides’
own?) once existed, in which Artemis appeared and promised that she would rescue Iphigenia and replace her with a deer as victim.\textsuperscript{26}

Although Simone Weil knew Greek very well and even made her own translations,\textsuperscript{27} it may be rather doubtful whether she was aware of this fact. If, however, Artemis appears and rescues Iphigenia in this world, the ending is even less violent, there is even less difference between Iphigenia and Genesis 22.

With Racine, the ending is different: it turns out that another young woman is to be sacrificed. Eriphile, who is also called “Iphigénie”, is the sacrifice demanded by the gods, and she eventually sacrifices herself voluntarily.\textsuperscript{28} In this case, one can actually say that the plot is crueler than the narrative of the Hebrew Bible.

There is yet another candidate for which Iphigenia Weil might have meant: Agamemnon, the first part of Aeschylus’ Oresteia, is a very important text for Weil, and in this play, there are several allusions and explicit references to the killing of Iphigenia by Agamemnon.\textsuperscript{29} Like Racine’s version, that text would give obvious meaning to Weil’s talk of violence: “Le sacrifice d’Iphigénie […] est […] violence” means that there is a kind of violence in Iphigenia, and “fait pendant au sacrifice d’Isaac, comme le mal au bien” means, that in Genesis 22, this kind of violence is absent. In both Racine’s and Aeschylus’ plots, the sacrifice of a human being is this violence.

Therefore, if Weil is referring only to a version or versions of Iphigenia in which there is human sacrifice, it is clear what the cruelty is that is not found in Genesis 22.\textsuperscript{30} If she at least also knew versions in which no one is sacrificed – which seems to me, given Weil’s literacy, very probable –, the dichotomy remains in need of clarification: In what respect is Abraham less violent, even if one assumes that Iphigenia was not sacrificed?

There is no evidence that Weil knew of any work by exegetes who assume the existence of a (less violent) pre- or alternative version of Genesis 22.\textsuperscript{31} So we have to start with the story that is found in today’s Bibles.

\textsuperscript{26} Rutherford, Preface to Iphigenia at Aulis, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{27} See Loades, Simone Weil and Antigone, p. 277.
\textsuperscript{28} See Racine, Iphigenia, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{29} Aeschylus, Agamemnon, pp. 1525–1529.
\textsuperscript{30} Animal sacrifice as cruelty is out of the question, because it also occurs in Gen. 22 and is not a concern for Weil.
\textsuperscript{31} The vast majority of biblical scholars do not assume that there is a different or earlier version of Genesis 22 that is less violent in any respect (see, e.g., Westermann, Genesis 12–36, p. 354); one exception is Omri Boehm who argues that there was an earlier version.
Apart from God’s order, Abraham has no motive to kill Isaac (he is not promised anything in return); Agamemnon, on the other hand, acts out of self-interest (in the interest of the Greeks). This means that Agamemnon, unlike Abraham, can be seen as a source or origin of the violence towards his child.

Furthermore, Abraham submits to the world and its events (to God); Agamemnon resists them. This can be seen as a kind of non-violence on the part of Abraham.

On the other hand, it also reveals a certain proximity between the violence that occurs and the second concept Weil mentions: disobedience. Agamemnon’s disobedience causes the misery in the first place: He first kills the sacred stag of Artemis and then seeks to escape Artemis’ will. Abraham is obedient throughout the whole story of the Akedah, he complies with the order, where “order” can be understood in both of its meanings: The French word “ordre”, like the English “order”, has the meaning of “command” (“Befehl” in German) as well as the meaning of “rule”, “structure”, “regularity” (“Ordnung” in German). For the corresponding obedience, Weil explicates the two options:

Obedience is a vital need of the human soul. It is of two kinds: obedience to established rules and obedience to human beings looked upon as leaders. It presupposes consent [...].

This quotations from The Need for Roots also shows that the term “obedience” has a positive meaning for her. While – as a consequence of God turning himself into necessity – “necessity is the obedience of matter”, for man, to be obedient means to leave and accept things simply as they are, not as we want them to be, to accept them as not being the subject of any aims or intentions:

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32 That Abraham is obedient here is also noted by Simone Weil elsewhere. Weil, Obéissance au sujet d’Isaac, p. 281 (K10, ms. 44).
33 Immediately before the quotation, Simone Weil refers to the idea of an eternal curse (which can only be interrupted by a completely innocent being) in ancient Greece. One could see in it a counterpart to the eternal blessing on Abraham. And both could then be considered a kind of order.
34 Weil, The Need for Roots, p. 11 et seq.
35 “Dieu se fait nécessité.” Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 266 (K5, ms. 115).
36 Weil, Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks, p. 186.
Obéissance, il y en a deux. On peut obéir à la pesanteur, ou aux rapports des choses. Dans le premier cas, on fait ce que à quoi pousse l'imagination combleuse de vide. [...] Si on suspend le travail de l'imagination combleuse et qu'on fixe l'attention sur le rapport des choses, une nécessité apparaît, à laquelle on ne peut pas ne pas obéir. Jusque-là, on n'a pas la notion de la nécessité, ni le sentiment de l'obéissance.37

Within her conception of obedience, which is obviously influenced by the Stoics as well as by Spinoza, we can see obedience to a rule and obedience to a person (the order as a structure and the order as a demand) merge in the obedience to God:

When a man consents to obey God, the spirit in him obeys, that is to say, it becomes subject to the rules of spiritual phenomena; and by a mechanism of which we know nothing the rest of his being adepts itself to the spirit sufficiently for those laws to operate.38

In this section we hope to have shown that there is a sense, solidly anchored in Weil's writings, of “non-violent” and “obedient” in which Abraham is both, while Agamemnon is neither – as the opening quote of this section asserts. Furthermore, we have outlined, at least for certain contexts, the meaning of obedience for Weil.

4 Sacrifice and Conformity with an Order

Weil thus treats Genesis 22 once under the aspect of sacrifice (connected with the creation of a void) and once under the aspect of obedience to an order. This raises the question of the relationship between sacrifice and order – a question which becomes even more virulent, if one takes into account that

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37 Weil, Cahiers 2, p. 290 (K5, ms. 46): “Obedience: there are two kinds. We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationship between things. In the first case, we do what we are urged to by the imagination which fills up voids. We can affix thereto, and often with a show of truth, a variety of labels, including righteousness and God. If we suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship between things, a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying. Until then we have not the notion of necessity, nor have we the sense of obedience.” Weil, Notebooks, p. 155.

38 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, p. 263.
Weil also puts the two terms together with a more fundamental intention; in the so-called “Petit carnet noir” she notes:

| régularité | sacrifice |
| « Acte moral | (conf[ormité] à un ordre) « |

What sense can we make of this classification of moral acts, which at first sight seems perplexing? Why should every moral act be either conformity with an order or a sacrifice?

The starting point of Weil’s reflections is, as we have seen, that human beings are supposed to fit into the order of the world by means of obedience. This is a call for “suspending activity” (see fn. 37). However, they are also supposed to contribute something: Sacrifice is the only thing that one can do as an individual in his or her relationship with God and the world. The fact that Weil never mentions a command in the context of the first passage – “Sacrifice d’Abraham. Quoi de plus complet comme vide?” – already indicates that she has an individual’s own initiative in mind. Her conception of individualism, however, is an alternative to that which understands individualism as self-assertion. On the contrary, Weil sees the task of the individual vis-à-vis

39  Weil, *Cahiers* 1, p. 401 (Annexe 11 = Petit carnet noir, ms. 41):
regularity

> Moral act (conf[ormité] to an order) «
sacrifice

Since “Conf[ormité] à un ordre” is put in brackets, it seems to me to belong to “régularité”, and not to be an intermediate between regularity and sacrifice. If it is an intermediate, that does not change my considerations in any significant way. Then, however, it would be interesting to ask if it stands in between based only on the fact that a word has two different meanings or if there is really a mediating idea. (When is “rule” equal to “command”? One would have to look at the divine command theory here, or from the secular side, for example, at Kant.)

40  It should be noted here that Weil, beginning in her early writings, breaks down the dichotomy of activity and passivity; compare Heinsohn, *Simone Weils Konzept der attention*, p. 242.

41  The concept of “attention”, which is central to Weil’s stance on ethics, also has an “active” and a “passive” aspect. See, e.g., Heinsohn, *Simone Weils Konzept der attention*, p. 13; Kotva, *Effort and Grace*, p. 132 et seq.

42  Self-sacrifice, to be precise. For more recent literature and an overview of existing literature on self-sacrifice see Ackeren/Archer, *Self-Sacrifice and Moral Philosophy*, and the whole volume to which this is the editorial.

43  Compare also what she writes one page before the mention of Abraham’s sacrifice: “Il faut aller par soi-même jusque’à cette limite. Là on touche le vide.” Weil, *Cahiers* 2, p. 137 (k4, ms. 107).
God in the reduction of subjectivity, in decreation. Abraham represents perfection (his acting is *le plus complet*) also in this respect: the sacrifice of Isaac means the renunciation of that which makes him the progenitor. The qualities that Weil attributes to Abraham – to anyone experiencing a void – testify to his personal involvement: “une angoisse, une révolte désespérée, [...] résignation”,... Not only Abraham’s sacrifice is presented as an expression of his individuality, in many places Weil describes sacrifice as something *someone does*, for example:

Sacrifice is a gift to God, and giving to God is destroying. It is right, therefore, to think that God abdicated in order to create and that by destroying we are making restitution to him. God’s sacrifice is creation; man’s sacrifice is destruction. But man has the right to destroy only what belongs to him; that is to say, not even his body, but solely and exclusively his will.44

Sacrifice and obedience, both are modes of blending in – in this particular sense; but this must not lead us to overlook the fact that they are fundamentally different. The similarity, as well as the difference, are well expressed by Lissa McCoullough:

Everything in the world is subject to necessity; only when universal subjection to necessity is transcended in thought can it be grasped or “read” alternately as pure obedience. Insofar as we are fleshly creatures whose existence depends on material conditions, we obey necessity as everything else does. But insofar as we are thinking beings, Weil contends, we can recognize necessity as a form of obedience and consent to it voluntarily in a spirit of sacrificial redemption.45

The moral mandate of human beings is to fit into the world created and ordered by God (obedience), but they cannot simply let this happen, their contribution is sacrifice.

One question now remains: What about avoidance of violence? Why does this not enter Weil’s conception of a “moral act”, although she calls violence “bad” (“[...] le mal [...] violence”) in the second quote discussed at length? Whether Agamemnon kills Iphigenia depends solely on Artemis. This makes it clear that – whatever aspects of her multi-faceted conception of violence Simone Weil might have had in mind here – violence is not to be found among

44 Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 212 et seq.
45 McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil*, p. 154 et seq.
the motives, among the constituents of moral acts. It gives moral acts a direction; it does not ground them.

Violence is rather a political category for Weil here. Sacrifice and obedience have certainly not unjustly been discredited in contemporary ethical and political theories. Nevertheless, Weil’s estimation of these conceptions as the very basics of moral acts could be read as a call for a kind of modesty, as a call not to put oneself above the world (“renoncer à être en imagination le centre du monde”). However, that does not mean that the condition of modesty cannot include the individual’s contribution by sacrificing.

Biography

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