

Foreword

That which limits is God. . . . That which is unlimited has no existence except in receiving a limit from outside.

—Simone Weil, *Divine Love in Creation*

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.

—Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*

It is always an interesting experience, pleasurable and uncanny at the same time, to read books authored by friends: they not only expand your knowledge about the new topics they are unraveling, but also they reveal aspects of their “academic personality” of which you were totally unaware. And this is precisely what happened to me while reading this book.

Simone Weil: Mystic of Passion and Compassion reveals Maria Clara Bingemer’s latest attempt to untangle one of her favorite, most pervasive, and consistent topics: *the analysis of the limits of this world from a religious perspective*. Even though I have never heard Maria Clara use those exact

Foreword

words to refer to that topic, I think they perfectly define her interests as a scholar. Beginning with her theological writings, Maria Clara has approached the study of the limits by tackling issues as important as prophecy, mysticism, sanctity, the Trinity, social commitment, liberation theology, and the role of the woman in the Catholic Church. More recently, taking a rather philosophical standpoint, she has examined contemporary thinkers who have devoted their lives to exploring the limits between ethics, religion, and social engagement, such as Emmanuel Mounier, Ignazio Silone, Emmanuel Levinas, Edith Stein, René Girard, Etty Hillesum, and Simone Weil.

Even though Maria Clara is fond of all these philosophers, it is Simone Weil who holds a special place in her writings. Weil appeals to her, not only because of her heroic, almost epic, life, but also for her convoluted religious experience; not only for being an exceptional witness in a tumultuous and treacherous time, but also for exercising a critical voice against the social inequalities of her moment; not only for conceptualizing the experience of living in a world devoid of God, but also for formulating a spirituality that aims to find Him in his very absence.

The conjunction of these aspects makes Simone Weil, in the eyes of Maria Clara, an exceptional thinker, full of thought-provoking insights, and one who entirely fulfills her arguably three main academic interests: prophecy, mysticism, and social commitment. As a prophetic voice, Weil is portrayed as a *wounded intellectual* who, immersed in sheer political activism, “saw well beyond her time; . . . threw herself into experiences and projects before others would do so, and . . . came to serve as a reference for others who would later travel the same path” (chapter 2). As a mystic writer, Weil is depicted as an *attentive, obedient, and unaffiliated Christian*, possessed by a relentless desire of kenotic abasement: “Her life’s meaning, and the only way not to squander her death, was to remain in complete solitude, in absolute darkness, in profound silence, in the hands of the One who alone is able to tend to her cries” (chapter 4). Finally, as a social thinker, Weil is described as a *wounded cantor*, eager to uncover the always unsettling and elusive truth: Weil is a thinker wounded by the truth that “no poetry concerning the people is authentic if fatigue does not figure in it, and the hunger and thirst which come from fatigue” (chapter 4).

By emphasizing these liminal features, Maria Clara invites us, the readers, to place Simone Weil in the philosophical tradition of *the limit*.¹

1. We must recall here that the Spanish version of this book is titled *Simone Weil*:

This tradition—whose main representatives are Plato, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein²—focuses on the analysis of two main questions, “what is being?” and “what is the truth?” In exploring these two questions, this tradition manages to map *the limits of the world* by separating two sets of elements: those that can be sensed, understood, and stated, from those that can merely be intuited, contemplated, or imagined. Thus, Plato, to start with the eldest in the tradition, sets the limits of the world by establishing the existence of a *hyperuranios* realm, inhabited with eternal forms (*eidōs*), that give shape to the entirety of our perceptions. For Kant, the *phenomenal* world is *metaphysically* limited by an unreachable and unknowable *noumenon* (the thing-in-itself), and *transcendentally* divided into three autonomous realms: the epistemological (*What can I know?*), the ethical (*What ought I to do?*), and the religious (*What may I hope?*). For Hegel, the limits of the world are generated by an absolute mind or spirit (*Geist*), which evolves and transforms our world into a quasi-totalitarian system. For Heidegger, death is the ultimate limit (*peras*) of human existence, encircling the subject (*Dasein*) into its domain and exacerbating its radical freedom. For Wittgenstein, language establishes the limits of the world by separating what *exists* (and “can be said”) from what does not exist (and about which one must keep silent).

At *par* with this tradition, Weil believes that *this world*—or, as she calls it, *the reality of here below* (*réalité d’ici-bas*)—is limited. Like Plato, she believes that there is a transcendent *reality outside it* (the *réalité hors du monde*), for which the ultimate purpose is to *guide, in-form, and trans-form* this world. For her, “That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in the world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligations.”³ Humans, caught in between both worlds, have the liminal function to connect both realities, since they, and only they, are capable to long for an absolute good, “a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any other object in this world.”⁴ However, not everyone is up to that challenge. Only “those whose attention and love are turned towards that reality are the sole intermediary through which good can descend from there and come

una mística a los límites, which can be translated as *Simone Weil: A Mystic at the Limits*.

2. See Trias, *Los Límites del Mundo*.

3. Miles, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 202.

4. *Ibid.*

Foreword

among men.”⁵ In establishing this division, Weil manages to determine a second limit, ethico-spiritual this time, between two kinds of individuals: those who are willing to open their minds to the transcendent reality, and to transform the unjust situations of this world by allowing the good to descend and be part of it; and those who, overlooking that outer reality, thoughtlessly accept the limitation of this world, and assume its consequential inequalities.

Although Weil’s interpretation of this *second limit* sets her apart from the modern and contemporary philosophers of the limit,⁶ it is precisely the theological possibilities that it opens that captures Maria Clara’s attention and prompts her to use it in her research. In fact, I would argue, the reason why Maria Clara selects Simone Weil’s philosophy is not primarily for the theoretical and metaphysical implications that I just have mentioned, but eminently for its ethical and religious repercussions. Her ultimate interest is to describe liminal situations where the ethical is radicalized to such a degree that it unveils and reveals, almost abruptly, the hidden presence of the sacred. Thus, the *cross*, to start with the most representative of those situations, captures those liminal moments in which degradation, affliction, and despair give rise to life, joy, and liberation. The *incarnation* portrays the capacity of the supernatural to penetrate, immerse, and dwell in the least desirable and most degraded zones of this world. The *Eucharist* signifies the human longing for transformation, change, and renewal. *Martyrdom* represents the radical offering of someone’s life for the sake of the ultimate reality. *Kenosis* expresses the willful desire to descend to, and be transformed by, the most inhuman and merciless experiences of this world. And *sanctity* suggests the liminal experience of waiting in “pure abstention” and in “inactive action” behind a mythical *door (la porte)* that, according to the famous Weillienne poem (Prologue in OC VI/3, 369–70), invites and deprives the traveler from the transcendent reality.

But this intellectual journey through the *religious* and *ethical* limits of the world does not stop here. It leads us to a third and final limit: Simone Weil herself. In the last chapter of the book, Weil is portrayed as a paradoxical, liminal, and conflicted figure, in constant struggle with her identity and beliefs. She is described, using four powerful images, as a self-exiled Jew in permanent struggle with her understanding of Judaism; as an

5. Ibid.

6. Kant, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, unlike Weil, believe that the other reality is unreachable, unknowable, and has no part in this life.

Foreword

intellectual, more interested in praxis than theory; as an unaffiliated mystic whose metaphysical interests go beyond the teachings of the traditional religious systems; and as a pioneer of interfaith dialogue who uses its inner contradictions to reach supernatural truth. By introducing this new limit into the narrative plot, Maria Clara not only changes the dynamic of the book, but also its intention. Now, intermingled with her academic interests, emerges a more subjective one: one that compels the readers to take a personal stand on Simone Weil's philosophy and face the uncomfortable, but probably unavoidable, question about whether we agree or disagree with her premises; whether we adhere to or refuse her viewpoints; and whether we accept or reject her provocative proposals altogether. But that is neither easy nor desirable. Simone Weil's philosophy, as the rest of philosophies available at present, must not be accepted or refused based solely on the degree of emotional bonding that the reader is capable of establishing with the author. On the contrary, what it is more appropriate, and where the last chapter of this book is leading us, is to take a more solid perspective. It invites us to take a step further, come back to the first chapters of the book, and contemplate afresh the big picture of Simone Weil's life. *Exitus and reditus*. Only by closing the circle it is possible to fully appreciate the transcendental aspects of Weil's philosophy, the problematic of some of its ethical approaches, and the (in)convenience of its pointed proposals. Only by taking distance it is viable to create an existential gap between us and Simone Weil's life, that allows us to decide whether we accept or refuse *some, none, or all* of her philosophical positions.

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Boston, January 6, 2015