

E. Jane Doering

Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force.
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E. Jane Doering presents us with '[t]wo contrary readings of the universe: Hitler's versus Simone Weil's' (106). Each chapter presents a period from Weil's short life as a writer, and is broken down into short sections on particular texts or themes. By this narrative, Doering hopes to convey the entire evolution of Weil's thinking about war.

Chapter 1 covers the period up to Hitler's invasion of Prague. The facts are that prior to this Weil tried to fight for Republican Spain but urged French neutrality on pain of aggravating Hitler, and in the Munich crisis agitated for France to break its defense treaty with Czechoslovakia. Doering argues that Weil's support for appeasement was 'miscalculation' (39) of the 'costs' (23). Less kindly, one might worry that in her pacifist period Weil was briefly attracted to consequentialism because it was possible to estimate the consequences in such a way as to justify pacifism. A competing notion of moral obligation was the main contemporary argument for action, as in 'France made a promise to Czechoslovakia'. The later Weil, who in returning to Plato moved far from consequentialism, was more repentant about her failure here than Doering's talk of 'miscalculation' quite allows.

In Chapter 2 we learn that Weil's first efforts after Munich blame the failure of French diplomacy to impress Hitler with the love of peace on the injustices of the French colonies: 'double standards in morality [making] a country's reputation for integrity a source of mockery' (49). Doering's sympathy with this view raises an eyebrow. After all Weil was arguing that had France been morally pure, it would have been possible for France to betray Czechoslovakia more effectively. In greatest contrast, we then come to Weil's *The Iliad, or Poem of Force*. This is widely regarded as the most powerful and compelling discussion of Greek art in print. Weil: 'The bitterness of [the *Iliad*] is spent upon the only true cause of bitterness: the subordination of the human soul to might, which is, be it finally said, to matter. That subordination is the same for all mortals, although there is a difference according to the soul's degree of virtue, according to the way in which each soul endures it' (from *The Iliad, or Poem of Force*, page 51 of *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, Ark Paperbacks 1987). Doering claims to have 'sorted out [Weil's] meaning of the term *force* in many different contexts' (10), but Weil's argument is that there is only one context here. That the force in military might is the force in all matter is the main thrust of the *Poem of Force*.

Doering's talk (54, 81, *passim*) of 'choices' as being for Weil things that we necessarily have—whether we make them with 'authenticity' (81) or not—is unfortunate.

For Weil, the ‘grace’ to resist force is not a native autonomy such as assumed by Kant and Sartre, but something exceptional with a divine source to which we may cultivate access only by ‘indirect’ means. Weil’s use of ‘grace’ is bound up with her reading of Plato’s myth of the cave, and it is troubling that Plato is hardly mentioned. He is not in the index. Also in Chapter 2, Doering remarks that for Weil victory means ‘changing the soul of the enemy’ (65), and the sense of this is that mere conquest or arm-twisting would impose a *temporary* peace, much as Europe experienced from 1919 to 1939. In the intended European context Weil’s point was acute, and the permanent negotiation of the European Union is a definite improvement. But Doering implies that an earnest desire to change the soul of the enemy is something missing from the conduct of *American* foreign policy. This may amuse.

Chapter 3 treats Weil’s discussion of Rome, both of Caesar and of Pope. One moral Doering takes from Weil’s critique of the Roman Church is that in later colonial expansion ‘the obliteration of pre-Christian societies eliminated their ability to bring their perceived truths to bear’ (78). Doering seems to intend an ecological conservatism about culture: all the forests contain medicine. But if Weil’s thought were that, she would have treated the Hebrew Bible as containing some valuable portion of the truth. What she in fact does is to rail against the Old Testament God as authoritarian. Doering is perplexed by this, and tries to account in some way for what she takes as an aberration. I doubt there is any aberration. Weil objected to force in religious evangelism. She also held that the wisdom she extracted from Plato could be found in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and in Heraclitus. Neither view comes to the doctrine that every religion has truths.

Chapter 4 is the motivating centre of this book. Doering quotes Hitler: ‘force alone reigns everywhere as mistress over weakness’ (106). The problem is that Doering takes Weil to be disagreeing with Hitler just where she agrees with him. Doering quotes Weil: ‘[Man] is certainly not lord and master over nature, and Hitler was right [there]...but man is son of the master of the house...when he is on the knees of his father and is identical to him through love, he shares in the authority’ (108). This is near to love of fate (the father), and to Spinoza’s monism. It is not near to Doering’s picture of nature as one of two competing powers. Doering: ‘if force reigned alone...there would be no place for justice’ (106). By having Weil name Love as a countervailing power to force, Doering forgets that Weil’s Love is directed precisely at the natural mechanism. Weil’s difference with Hitler is, as in the *Poem of Force*, ‘a difference according to the soul’s degree of virtue, according to the way in which each soul endures [force]’ (*Intimations* 51). Doering takes Weil to object to the thought that we are subject to force. But for Weil it is Hitler’s *attitude* to our subordination to force that is faulty, in a variety of ways. Hitler does not as he pretends love force (nature, the father), because he does not correctly discern it. He has a stunted grasp of the mechanism, which, Weil reminds us, includes that energy which Plato called ‘Eros’. Weil: ‘the structure of the human heart is a reality among the realities of this universe, just as is the trajectory of a celestial body’ (106). For Doering, this last remark *opposes* love and the mechanism, but Weil evidently meant to say that love was

part of the mechanism, ‘just as is the trajectory of a celestial body’ (106).

Inter alia Chapter 5 expands on the idea that Hitler and Weil have ‘two different readings of the universe’ by supplying background to Weil’s notion of a ‘reading’ of the human situation. This interesting topic takes Doering back to Weil’s diploma dissertation on Descartes. Weil: ‘[the blind man] taps the things directly with his stick as if his stick had feeling and was part of his body’ (123). Doering dangerously assumes that Weil, in discussing one of Descartes’ examples, must be expounding a ‘Cartesian theory’ (124).

Chapter 6, ‘Simone Weil and the Bhagavad-Gita’, stands interestingly apart from the flow of Doering’s narrative, both because it is a chapter-length treatment of a single Weil text, and because what Weil is quoted as saying in that text would appear to contradict Doering’s general treatment of her as a supernaturalist. Weil: ‘*Prakṛti* [nature] with its *guṇa* does everything—even the good’ (161); ‘*Dharma* is necessity loved’ (168). These are neglected avenues. Doering’s purpose in introducing Weil’s reading in Hindu thought is to chiefly to compare her political activism with Gandhi’s: ‘one imagines that she would have wholeheartedly concurred with Gandhi’s successful campaign of civil disobedience against the British imperialists’ (166).

Chapter 7 dwells on the parallel Weil saw between French colonial rule and what the Nazis were doing to France itself. Doering’s theme of implicit commentary on American foreign policy nears the surface as *l’Indochine* becomes Vietnam. Doering’s suggestion is that if De Gaulle had realised Weil’s plan (sketch) for post-war retreat from the colonies, *The Spectre of Self-Perpetuating Force* might have been stopped in its tracks long before the horrors of Algeria and Vietnam. I think this is true, but cheaply said. Doering makes no mention of *Les Pieds Noir*.

Through the device of exploring Weil’s posthumous reception by Camus and Dwight Macdonald (editor of the journal *Politics*), Chapter 8 concludes by making the running critique of post-war American foreign policy perfectly explicit. The error Doering has in mind she takes to embrace the whole enterprise from Truman to Bush. Doering: ‘The decision to explode the atomic bomb does unhappily exemplify the mistaken belief of some men that they could control force’ (219). That Truman believed he had acted to save lives by avoiding months of costly hand-to-hand combat is a point Doering does not consider. Nor does it occur to Doering that Truman’s willingness to ‘sacrifice’ Nagasaki to save the lives of men in uniform rather parallels Weil’s early preparedness to ‘sacrifice’ Czechoslovakia—even to the extent of Weil anticipating that the Czechs would be forced to ‘marginalize’ (38) Czech Jewry and thinking that a price worth paying for the lives of French soldiers. Where Weil’s consequentialism is supposed to be merely ‘miscalculation’ (39), that of Bush and Truman is supposed to be ‘a separation between inhumane acts and personal responsibility’ (219). This may be selective generosity.

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