

CREATING ETHICAL SOCIETIES IN A CONCENTRATIONARY UNIVERSE

Simone Weil's Phenomenological Ethics of Attention

Robert Reed♦

Abstract: This essay argues that Simone Weil's writings suggest a phenomenological method of particular relevance to investigating ethical questions. It begins by presenting evidence that although Weil does not mention phenomenology explicitly, she thinks about ethics in a phenomenological manner. Subsequent sections outline a "phenomenological ethics" derived from Weil's notion of attention and her hermeneutics of 'reading' the world. Since attention sets aside the self and its personal world, this allows for an ethics of self-abdication (decreation) relatively free of influence by the forces of domination. David Rousset's term "concentrationary universe" is introduced to describe the claim, argued by Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, and others, that present-day societies show evidence of an increasing reliance on ways of thinking derived from the Nazi concentration camps. Examples are given of applications of Weil's phenomenological method to the problem of how to recognize signs of potential domination in a concentrationary universe.

Keywords: concentrationary universe, ethical questions, ethics of self-abdication, phenomenological ethics

1. Introduction

Survivors of the Shoah (Holocaust, as it is commonly called), such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry, have warned us that, even decades later, we have yet to fully confront its implications and present-day legacy. One incidental consequence of that event has not been overlooked, however, and that is a (post)modern scepticism or even cynicism as to

♦**Dr Robert Reed** is currently retired after thirty years of teaching mathematics at Boston College, where he also recently completed a doctorate in Philosophy. He has published on Weil, Levinas, and Kierkegaard. E-mail: reedr@bc.edu

whether ethics can have any legitimate foundation after Auschwitz. Emmanuel Levinas, who lost most of his family in the Shoah, refers to this question when he opens his major work *Totality and Infinity* with the observation that “everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” (Levinas, 21). Needless to say, many of us are still far from knowing.

The present essay argues that Simone Weil’s notion of *attention* suggests a phenomenological method for approaching this problem based on the idea that the relevance of ethics is foundationally verified only by each person individually. As Weil means the word, attention is a way of making contact with reality by attempting to set aside one’s self—one’s personal ‘world’ or comprehensive worldview. Since the latter invariably tends to conceal or betray the otherness of other persons and hence the real nature of their sufferings and needs, this move allows for an ‘impersonal’ ethics, an ethics of self-abdication motivated by nothing more than love of the Good.

Weil never claimed to be a phenomenologist herself. While she must have heard of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the intellectual circles of Paris in which she moved in the 1930s and early 1940s, Weil does not mention their work explicitly in any of her writings as far as I know.¹ I therefore begin by presenting evidence that nonetheless Weil thinks about ethics in a phenomenological manner. This will introduce us to Weil’s general approach to ethical questions and her unusual concept of *decreation*. Subsequent sections outline a ‘phenomenological ethics’, derived from Weil’s notion of attention. I use David Rousset’s term ‘concentrationary universe’² to describe the claim, argued by Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, and others, that almost all present-day societies show evidence of an increasing reliance on techniques of control or ways of thinking made

¹In spite of this, more studies are beginning to appear that mention phenomenology in connection with Weil. See, for example, several of the essays in A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone, ed. *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

²This term for the concentration camp environment, or anything resembling it, was first introduced by Holocaust survivor David Rousset in his book *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (1946); English translations: *A World Apart*, trans. Yvonne Moyse (1951), *The Other Kingdom*, trans. Ramon Guthrie (1982).

notorious by the extremes of the Nazi concentration camps. The essay then closes with examples of applications of Weil's method to the problem of how to recognize signs of potential domination from within the concentrationary universe.

2. Weil's Phenomenological Approach to the Real

Throughout her short life (1909-43), Simone Weil disciplined herself to practices that bore a strong resemblance to the phenomenological reduction. In a late notebook entry, for example, she writes that many years earlier, while she was preparing for the entrance examination to the *École Normale Supérieure*, "my 'ultra-Spinozist form of meditation' consisted of contemplating an object fixedly with the mind, asking myself: What is it?, without thinking of any other object or relating it with anything else, for hours together. This was a koan." But then after giving several examples of riddles from myth or folklore which she thought were "no doubt koans" in the style of Zen Buddhism, Weil goes on to comment in a somewhat different vein:

To solve them means to understand that there is nothing to be solved, that existence possesses no significance for the discursive faculties, and that the latter must not be allowed to wander outside their role as mere exploratory instrument of the intelligence with a view to making contact with brute reality. Having solved the riddle, you marry the princess, you inherit the kingdom (Weil, *Notebooks*, 446).

"Making contact with brute reality," a reality experienced as radically *other* than oneself, was Weil's idea of living the truth. The ultimate purpose of the "discursive faculties" is not to acquire an intellectual understanding of that reality—often amounting, Weil thought, to reducing it to how one *wished* to see it—but to place one into contact with *something*, whatever it might be, as free as possible from the effects of one's "imagination" (Weil's term for human consciousness). For consciousness generally seeks to reduce everything it encounters to the safe and familiar totality one calls the 'world', assuming it to be the same world for everyone but viewed from different perspectives. Weil maintains that the final goal of intellectual effort is not truth as comprehension but reality. Truth is instead a discipline or *orientation*, a *way of living*, the goal of which is solely to make contact with the real.

When, in the same notebook entry, Weil goes on to claim that the "object of Zen Buddhism [is] to discover how much the essence of

existence differs from that of the intelligible" (Weil, *Notebooks*, 446), she is making, first of all, a Kierkegaardian point about *existence* in the uncompromising sense Kierkegaard gave that word. Solving the riddle (the intelligible) merely *opens the door to* contact with reality. Marrying the princess *is* the reality (existence). For an existing human being, actually to exist is more difficult than to *think about* existence. But Weil's point is also that insight into the reality of things is not so much a matter of discovering what one can say about them in terms of what one already knows, fitting them into one's world (making them 'intelligible'), as it is a matter of letting things speak for themselves notwithstanding what one knows, perhaps by seeing them as much as possible as *foreign* to one's world—as indeed they are, in themselves and apart from what one conceives ('imagines') them to be. One must surrender oneself to the foreignness of things, paradoxically allowing them to show their genuine *unreality* (as one initially interprets it) in order to reveal their *reality*, the reality they have apart from one's interpretations. But surrender means giving up something of one's current version of the world, and therefore something of oneself. Husserl's famous slogan, 'To the things themselves', can for Weil only mean *away from the self* and its familiar, made-up world. The personal 'reality' Weil says the mind (imagination) systematically constructs for itself appears 'real' because it is largely the product of one's own reason. Barring extraordinary or traumatic challenges, it always comes out more or less predictable, systematic, and *logical*. Hence whatever is real apart from that 'reality' will likely force itself on the mind in a way that at first seems *against* logic. A rational mind will tend to resist contact with reality. One overcomes this resistance, according to Weil, not by greater intellectual effort but by attentive self-emptying and patient *waiting* for whatever then chooses to make its appearance. Thus, for Weil, attention is basically an *ethical* move: self-abdication is essential to coming into contact with the real.

Experiencing the reality of one's neighbours, in particular, is much less a matter of acquiring systematic knowledge—noting their attributes, their differences from oneself in terms of what can be observed and classified in what Husserl called the natural attitude (looks, habits, abilities, etc.)—than it is a matter of acquiring a certain *orientation* in some respects *unnatural*, since one is 'orienting' oneself to what is in reality absolutely foreign. The orientation that reveals the other as truly *other* is not something one develops by independent

mental effort, for then how could it but fail to make contact with what is other than oneself? It is something one learns only with the help of others, especially the one with whom one presently desires to make contact. According to Levinas, one's dependence on others goes even deeper than experience or knowledge, however. One owes one's very subjectivity as ethical to the other. Similarly for Weil, one does not really encounter the *otherness* of the other person without remaining open to an ethical reorientation, even a kenosis, that allows the other to have a new significance in which one's self ideally plays *no role at all*, or at least ceases to be central.

3. Weil's Phenomenological Ethics of Attention

The phenomenological method has taken many forms in the course of its history, but it might be characterized very generally as a manner of *looking* based on the deliberate suspension or 'bracketing' of potentially interfering assumptions. The idea would be to gain a clearer vision of the real *otherness* of the object of study, whatever it might be, a sense of what the entity is in itself, independent of one's assumptions about such objects. Instead of contemplating only the end result of an intentional act—say, that of perceiving a box, which normally takes the form of an almost instantaneous representation based on what one learned early in life to call 'a box'—one attempts to break down the perception itself—perhaps into a collection of planar surfaces of various shades of colour meeting at different angles, that suggests itself from one's unique perspective when one brackets one's preconceptions about boxes. The objective is to make present what is imposed directly on the mind with a minimum of interpretation.

For Weil, learning about other persons differs from learning about objects such as boxes not only in the obvious respect that persons are incomparably more complex, but also, of greater significance from an ethical standpoint, in the distinct sense most of us have that another human being is a world unto him- or herself. Writes Weil:

We should have with each person the relationship of one conception of the universe to another conception of the universe, and not to a part of the universe. A man standing ten paces away from me is something separated from me by a distance (ten paces), but also another point of view under which all things appear (Weil, *Notebooks*, 24).

Had Weil explicitly developed a phenomenological method of her own, it would likely have required the phenomenologist to 'bracket' more than a set of perspectives. One could not simply set aside one's assumptions about the particular phenomenon one was observing; one would also need to set aside one's very *self*, as though imagining oneself absent from the world. This state of no-self is essentially what Weil means by *decreation*: in terms of her theology, this means begging God to take back (de-create) one's self as God's creation so that God and Creation can "exchange their secrets" without one's interference, an interference that generally takes the form of substituting one's own idea of good for reality, rather than allowing reality to dictate one's idea of good (Weil, *Notebooks*, 364, 422). Weil sometimes speaks of the decreative state as one's becoming transparent to the world, as though one were a window through which others (not necessarily one's own inconsequential self) might see reality as it is. "God loves the perspective of creation which can be seen only from where I stand, and I obscure it" (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 72).

Weil outlines a method for applying one's attention to the problem of recalling something one has forgotten, which I argue can be generalized to a decreative phenomenological practice suitable for investigating ethical questions in particular:

[A] thought comes into my head which seems to me important. I haven't the wherewithal for noting it down. I promise myself to remember it. Two hours later, it occurs to me that there is a thought which I have to remember. I haven't the remotest idea what it is, or even what it is about. So I turn my attention towards this thing about which I know simply that it *is*, but about which I haven't the least idea *what* it is. This effort of attention, empty of all content, may last several minutes. Then (if all goes well) the thing comes to me. I recognize, with absolute certainty, that it is indeed that. This empty form of reality has become a certain definite form of reality, ever real to me (Weil, *Notebooks*, 333-34).

Analogously—although there are essential differences we will need to consider—the attempt to bring to mind the reality of the other as other, or the reality of the relation I have with her, corresponds to an "effort of attention, empty of all content," directed at a "void" representing everything of which I am not conscious in my present experience of the person before me or the situation in which I find her. This void is the "empty form of reality," the *absence* of the reality I

seek. The "definite form of reality" I know exists is the other person herself, whom I always somehow miss meeting in the world as I experience or constitute that world. The reason I always miss the other is that as soon as I am conscious of knowing something about her, I have incorporated her into *my* world and thus made her something other than what she truly is. Without exception, everything I think I know about the other person betrays her in one way or another.

In order to bring to mind the other as other, a reality outside one's thematized world, one must apply the method of directing one's attention to the empty form of her reality, and then simply *wait*. The critical difference between this process and Weil's example of remembering something forgotten is that what is to be 'recalled' here is not something I once possessed—a forgotten thought—but something I will *never* possess—the other as *other*. It is precisely because the other's world is virtually inaccessible to me that I need a method for eliminating from consideration the obscuring assumptions I invariably make about the other person. What then shows itself will not be the absolute 'truth' about the other person—which is forever closed to me if it exists—but some detail I had previously overlooked, a different way of viewing her suffering, or an assumption I had been making without realizing it. The clearer vision that results, while still inevitably betraying the other to some extent and therefore inviting further refinement (more about this later), may lead to an intuition about a course of action, for example, which now seems so obvious that I carry it out almost without thinking. This decreative process, in which one makes contact with the other by bracketing one's own self and then waiting, is what I call Weil's phenomenological ethics of attention. We now consider how her method might apply to one of the defining ethical problems of our time.

4. The Concentrationary Universe

In the Nazi concentration camps, according to Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the process of turning a human being into a thing involved three stages (Arendt, 447-57): (i) elimination of what Arendt called the *juridical* self, the eradication of one's legal rights, leaving one without hope of justice; (ii) the "murder" of the *moral* self, leaving one with no ability to cope with one's environment in terms of one's usual moral categories—one might be forced, for example, to make impossible choices, such as which of one's children to save from

being sent immediately to the gas chambers; (iii) the destruction of the 'individual,' the annihilation of the *spontaneous* self. About spontaneity Arendt observes that it is "the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses." By adopting a "persistent stoicism," one can avoid its destruction for a long time, "taking refuge in the absolute isolation of a personality without rights or conscience" (Arendt 453). This conceivably refers to the strategy common in dealing with trauma, known as 'doubling,' the deliberate detachment of one's mind from the suffering body, or from the memory of its past suffering.

Arendt describes the spontaneous self "without rights or conscience" as a "sterile form" of human individuality. This state is comparable of the last remnants of what Weil calls "supplementary energy" before it reverts into the more basic "vegetative energy" required simply to maintain one's biological existence. Supplementary energy is the energy of spontaneity. It motivates the 'I' or ego in the desire to achieve a certain objective or to advance itself compared to others (Weil, *Notebooks*, 221). When this energy is taxed beyond one's limits, an experience Weil compares to encountering what she calls the void, vegetative energy takes over (Weil, *Notebooks*, 255, 495). At that point "there is nothing external"—that is, no purpose or goal—to compensate for the "internal tension" due to, say, an exhausting effort which has now become pointless. Weil's example is the "torment in a concentration camp, consisting of moving a stone from B to A, then from A to B, then from B to A again, and so on during the whole day. Very different from the same effort expended in the course of work" (Weil, *Notebooks*, 147). New arrivals to the concentration camps were subjected to an almost immediate loss of supplementary energy due to violent treatment experienced in a deliberately chaotic environment. With continuation, such treatment could, and apparently did, result in the loss of one's humanity, to the extent at least of one's resembling a *thing*. "The experience of the concentration camps," writes Arendt, shows paradoxically "that man's 'nature' is only 'human' insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural"—namely, a spontaneous individual. Hence its fragility.

After murder of the moral person and annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction of the individuality is almost always successful. ... For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own

resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events (Arendt, 455).

Mass annihilation of spontaneity in a people creates "the only form of society in which it is possible to dominate man entirely" (Arendt 456). For Arendt, this is the definition of totalitarianism, a society in which people are reduced, in Simone Weil's phrase, to "human material" (Weil, *Need for Roots*, 48). This characteristic of totalitarianism need not take the overt form of the concentration camp or the gulag. One now sees it, more covertly, in systems of government and business that reduce people to units of labour and units of consumption, where losses or gains in "human material" are calculated much as an accountant would add up revenue and cost. Calculation, instead of serving as a means to an end, becomes an end in itself. Weil saw this as early as 1934:

Thus, in all spheres, thought, the prerogative of the individual, is subordinated to vast mechanisms which crystalize collective life, and that is so to such an extent that we have almost lost the notion of what real thought is. The efforts, the labours, the inventions of beings of flesh and blood whom time introduces in successive waves to social life only possess social value and effectiveness on condition that they become in their turn crystalized in these huge mechanisms. The inversion of the relation between means and ends—an inversion which is to a certain extent the law of every oppressive society—here becomes total or nearly so, and extends to nearly everything (Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 104-5).

Total domination might be described as the attempt to turn the other person into a unit or *thing* defined solely by its space-time coordinates and its calculated function in society—that is, by its place in the world according to the dominant totalization or ideology. Since it destroys sociality, total domination isolates people from one another, producing the profound loneliness characteristic of life in totalitarian societies, an effect which is deliberately engineered and self-perpetuating. Living in isolation from others accentuates one's tendency to classify one's neighbours by the social roles delineated by the dominant ideology. Hence the oppressed gradually adopt the prejudices of their oppressors. One becomes extremely vulnerable to integration into the worldview of the dominant collective; hence it is increasingly more difficult to maintain one's spontaneity, much less direct it toward a recognition of the domination that is happening all

around one. If total integration of human beings into a human-made collectivity is possible—and with the advent of the concentrationary universe, there is little reason to doubt that it is—the result, paradoxically, can only be the very demise of the human.

5. Using the Will to Wear Down the Will

What makes the loss of spontaneity an evil is having it forced upon one from outside, involuntarily. Yet Weil *recommends* the *voluntary* removal of supplementary energy in favour of vegetative energy. This is essentially decreation. What, then, is the difference between these two ‘vegetative’ states, that of the living death of the concentration camp and that of decreation? For decreation, too, is a kind of ‘living death’: the death of the ‘I’. The difference between the two must lie in the *use* one makes of one’s supplementary energy. To some extent, human action cannot do without motives, but Weil sees all conscious motives as *self*-oriented to some degree and therefore suspect. The self is precisely what prevents one from seeing the neighbour as truly *other*. For this reason, Weil advises that one apply one’s supplementary energy to modifying or *eliminating* motives that favour the self. One uses one’s supplementary energy to become someone who ideally has no need of supplementary energy but who acts automatically, ‘motivated’ solely by attention to the other nurtured by love of the Good. Ultimately one would have no conscious motives for acting, but would act because one could not do otherwise—“impersonally”, in much the same way, Weil says, as an emerald is green (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 129). Weil calls this result non-active action. It is *passive* in that one acts from a purified ‘spontaneity’ in which the will or ‘I’ has been reduced to “nothing”. That the reduction of the self to nothing can produce, and is furthered by, the common experience of suffering is not surprising, but Weil says that it is also produced and furthered by what she calls “pure joy”:

One also wears down the ‘I’ through joy accompanied by an extreme attention. Pure compassion should make one more capable, and not less capable, of pure joy. And how is that? Once one has understood that one is nothing, the object of all one’s efforts is to become nothing. It is with this end in view that one accepts to suffer, *it is with this end in view that one acts*, it is with this end in view that one prays. O God! grant that I may become nothing. (Weil, *Notebooks*, 291-92, italics in the original)

The goal of the "wearing down" process of decreation, to become nothing, is the equivalent of becoming an unconscious instrument of Good. But just as all good on earth is mixed with evil, the decreative process in a human being is inevitably inhibited by some residual use of supplementary energy based on motives. Because motives are both unavoidable and have to "seem constant and solid" to the self that needs them, and since the imagination will do almost anything to give them this necessary but ultimately counterfeit reliability, one's reliance on motives leaves one vulnerable to ideology or tempted by idolatry. In a late notebook entry, Weil observes:

Thoughts are fluid; they are swayed by fantasy, passion, fatigue. But work has to be carried on persistently, for many hours a day, every day. Therefore motives are required which are proof against the instability of thoughts, that is to say, against *relation*; in other words, what is required is absolutes, or idols. ... What is needed is to find the least bad idols (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 160).

In everyday life, Weil implies, one cannot avoid flirting with idolatry. The key is to know that one's idols are idols and know how to treat them dispassionately enough to decide which ones are worth keeping for the time being, in some form or another, and which are not. Since the right use of one's supplementary energy is essential to a fully human life, an oppressor who makes use of its fragility in order to reduce human beings to things endangers humanity at its very root. But conversely, supplementary energy properly used—that is, decreatively—is the first step towards preventing total domination within the concentratory universe. In order to recognize one's idols for what they are, one must carefully study the blandishments of domination and identify in oneself the subtle thematizations which often serve the hidden purpose of minimizing one's own suffering at the other's expense. Doing this *within* the concentratory universe is not easy. Here is where a hermeneutics based on phenomenological ethics becomes indispensable.

6. The Hermeneutics of 'Reading for the Concentratory'

Each of us, simply in being conscious, thematizes the world every moment, aiming to create a personal totality in which we can feel at home. That being our habit, how is it possible to analyse and interpret these thematizations in a way that would alert us to their potential distortion or exploitation by total domination? How might one's

'reading' of the world, as Weil calls it, be sensitive to the otherness of the others with whom one lives, especially if one finds oneself living within the concentrationary universe?

Since all such reading, as a conscious activity aiming for stability and familiarity, must tend to dissimulate and betray the other's otherness, one's readings of the world would need to be continually revised in an endless hermeneutic cycle in which one repeatedly 'bracketed' one's every conscious attempt at comprehension of the world. In practice this corresponds to keeping the 'empty form of reality' empty, the void that represents the 'definite form of reality' which is the other person. A conscious commitment to preserving the alterity of the vulnerable other would therefore seem to require Weil's phenomenological ethics. Moreover, as one's readings are contingent on how one understands oneself, and this in turn depends on social and political factors that might have been otherwise than they are and are continually changing, including some that are concentrationary, the hermeneutic process would in effect need to constitute an attempt to reduce every thematization to its *ethical cost* in terms of potential availability to the forces of domination.

Toward the end of her essay on *Oppression and Liberty*, Weil makes a recommendation bearing a strong resemblance, as far as it goes, to the hermeneutic phenomenological project I have just outlined:

Given that once we have fully realized our almost complete powerlessness in regard to present day ills we are at any rate relieved of the duty of concerning ourselves with the present state of things, apart from those moments when we feel its direct impact, what nobler task could we assume than that of preparing for such a future [i.e. one that is "less inhuman"] in a methodical way by devoting ourselves to drawing up an inventory of modern civilization (115-16)?

What does Weil mean by an inventory of modern civilization? She first characterizes it in general terms as a task of "moral loneliness," likely only to produce for the individual who undertakes it the misunderstanding and hostility of those around him who seem to have made their peace with the system—or, conversely, of those who believe the system needs to be actively resisted in a more overt way. On the other hand, she recognizes that the task is far from solitary: it is other-oriented, and therefore an ethical task. Weil then presents the main idea for its accomplishment, but without going into details:

It would seem to be a question of separating, in present-day civilization, what belongs of right to man, considered as an individual, and what is of a nature to place weapons in the hands of the collectivity for use against him, whilst at the same time trying to discover the means whereby the former elements may be developed at the expense of the latter (Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 116).

By "man considered as an individual" Weil means, in essence, the human Being fundamentally characterized by the ability to be decreeted. The collectivity to which she refers is the concentrationary universe of present-day industrial society.³ What is required for such an appraisal, I have argued, is a phenomenological reduction involving the decreative abdication of the conscious self (Arendt's "spontaneity") to whatever degree is necessary in order to reveal the other whom consciousness continually betrays. Every thematization, every attempt to integrate alterity into a totality—thus allowing one to feel at ease with it while at the same time leaving one more susceptible to the forces of domination—can be reduced phenomenologically in order to reveal its ethical cost, its tendency to obscure the other. Any results obtained are provisional, however. The hermeneutics of reading outlined here must remain a continual process of constant reinterpretation which, in a sense, is an end in itself: a way of "living the truth" much as Vaclav Havel meant the phrase.⁴

7. An Example: Thinking about War

Phenomenological ethics can be viewed as (i) a phenomenology of how certain ethical decisions are actually made, or (ii) a pragmatic philosophy of ethical behaviour to be applied in an individual life. A third option is to apply phenomenological ethics to the investigation of largescale philosophical problems such as those that have motivated this essay: the question of whether or not ethics has any grounds since Auschwitz, and the project of identifying signs in

³Weil describes the latter in some detail in *The Need for Roots*, pp. 45-78. She does not use the phrase "concentrationary universe," of course. Rousset introduced it three years after Weil died.

⁴See the title essay in Vaclav Havel and John Keane, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1985.

present-day societies of the concentrationary legacy. To see how such an investigation might be carried out, we look at a fairly recent attempt to do something similar with respect to revealing the true nature of modern war.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry observes that attempts to resolve ethical problems related to war or torture have always suffered from what seems to be an insuperable failure to determine or simply acknowledge the nature of the phenomenon in question. Scarry's claim is that invariably we have already sabotaged the attempt to accurately describe war because of "the instability of our powers of perception and description" in the face of its horrors:

That war, relentlessly centered in the reciprocal activity of *injuring* and only distinguishable from other means of arriving at a winner and loser by the specific nature of injury itself, should so often be described as though *injuring were absent* from or, at most, secondary to its structure, ... indicates the ease with which our descriptive powers break down in the presence of a concussive occurrence, and may lead one to worry how we can set about to answer ethically complex questions about war when even the phenomenology of the event so successfully eludes us (Scarry, 278).

Over the centuries, we have acquired inveterate habits of discussing war almost solely in the language of strategy, politics, economics—anything but in terms of what it really is—to the extent that we have concealed from intellectual view its primary characteristic, that of largescale injuring for the purpose of determining which side will dictate terms. One would think that keeping the latter in mind should be indispensable to deciding whether or not there can be a just war, for example. And yet, according to Scarry, rarely is the characteristic of injuring mentioned in the relevant literature.

Weil not only places injury and suffering—specifically the extreme suffering she calls *affliction*—at the centre of her writings on war,⁵ but practically makes suffering the pivot of her entire thought. As the reader should be aware by now, this is far from a sign of a perverted

⁵There are several. The most famous is undoubtedly her long essay, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, in Seán Miles, ed., *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, New York: Grove Press, 1986, 162-195.

or depressed consciousness. It is easy to see why Weil does it, once one realizes that her 'phenomenology' is founded on attention motivated by love of reality, and that suffering is a prominent part of that reality. Because it gives first priority to preserving the other's integrity and employs a method of self-scrutiny that practically eliminates self-serving illusions, Weil's phenomenological ethics is unlikely to ignore the real nature of war as Scarry describes it. In fact, Scarry's book provides a wealth of data for just such an enterprise.

8. Conclusions

In Weil we find a phenomenology that makes use of a method deliberately designed to reveal the terrors and contradictions of life which the mind resists contemplating. Weil's phenomenological ethics is basic enough that it might even be described as *fundamental anti-concentrationary ethics*, arguably a necessary foundation of any ethical opposition to total domination.

Whether one is thinking about war, the Shoah, or evidence for the concentrationary universe in everyday life, it seems to be imperative that one keep one's focus on what the mind would rather forget. This means fixing one's attention on the 'empty form of reality' that corresponds to the concentrationary universe just as, and insofar as, it really exists. It is essential to realize that empty means *empty*, that the process requires constant vigilance to keep the mind continually unencumbered by whatever enters it from moment to moment—however trivial or profound the thoughts that enter it might seem to be. The process must at all costs be allowed to continue, perhaps indefinitely, until one finds oneself acting spontaneously, doing almost without thinking whatever seems obviously called for by the situation at hand.⁶ Thus the characteristic of Weil's phenomenological ethics that makes it most difficult to describe and think about intellectually, its stress on the importance of personal, individual action, is probably the characteristic most crucial to its success.

⁶This could very well include the task of thinking through in more detail the last thought one dismissed. There is little danger, then, of omitting an important insight if it is truly relevant to the situation one is confronting. On the other hand, it is all too easy to allow irrelevant thoughts to defer action. That is why the emphasis in the method is on dismissing every thought without exception.

The hermeneutic process of phenomenological ethics, because it strictly denies that the other as other can be thematized, makes the notion of 'living the truth' largely invisible to any philosophy based on comprehension of *what is*. An ontologically-oriented Western philosophical perspective will likely find less substance in the present essay than it would like, or else demand more concrete details on the 'abstract' notions of *attention* and *non-active action*. It may be, however, that comprehension of ethical matters is possible only in terms of the actual living of an individual human life. Otherwise Weil's ideas are susceptible to distortion by overthinking them.

A promising direction for further research would be to explore Weil's deep interest in Eastern thought, about which too little has been written. This interest developed mainly in the last years of her life, as she confronted the problem of how to oppose the threat of Nazi domination and violence. Thus Weil learned Sanskrit in order to read the Bhagavad Gita in the original, seeing its relevance to the problem of just war. It has been the argument of this essay that an ethical—that is to say, non-ontological—phenomenology is possible, one relevant to the problem of the expansion of domination in increasingly concentrationary societies, and that Simone Weil's ideas can provide its foundation. Perhaps with further work it will turn out someday to be an Eastern phenomenology more than a Western.

References:

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1994.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Tr. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Weil, Simone. *First and Last Notebooks*. Tr. Richard Rees. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Weil, Simone. *The Need for Roots*. London: Routledge Classics, 2002.
- Weil, Simone. *Notebooks*. 2 vols. Tr. Arthur Wills. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956.
- Weil, Simone. *Oppression and Liberty*. Tr. Arthur Wills and John Petrie. London: Routledge Classics, 2001.