

See also Authority; Determinism, A Historical Survey; Dilthey, Wilhelm; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; Philosophy of Social Sciences; Rickert, Heinrich.

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WEIL, SIMONE

(1909–1943)

The French author and mystic Simone Weil was born in Paris into a well-to-do family of distinguished intellectuals. During her lifetime she published only articles, dealing mainly with political and social issues, in obscure syndicalist sheets. Her uncompromising dedication to the search for truth and social justice as a way of life made her a significant though much debated personality. She lived a life of stringent deprivation. In spite of ill health she worked in factories, joined the anti-Franco volunteers in Spain, and worked as a farm laborer in the south of France after the 1940 defeat. After 1942 she lived in exile in New York and then in England. Jewish by birth, she wished to partake fully in the suffering of the victims of Nazism, and she allowed herself to die of hunger.

While in her twenties she was trained by Alain (Émile Auguste Chartier) in philosophy and logic. She had a voracious, relentless mind, and her studies included Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, several modern languages, philosophy, Western and Oriental religions, science, mathematics, and literature. Her writings are primarily based on textual comment and syncretic, ahistoric, and controversial interpretations. Her thought is rooted in Platonic and Stoic philosophy reinterpreted in terms of an apparently genuine mystical experience—in 1938 Weil experienced a moment of supernatural revelation and union with Christ. It gave her a mystical sense of vocation as possessor of a truth that she was delegated to transmit.

The bulk of her work, touching on the social, moral, aesthetic, and religious facets of life, was posthumously published. The published works combine fragments, more or less consistently developed and sometimes rather speciously selected, from her notebooks, letters, articles,

and memoranda. The three-volume *Cahiers* (two volumes in the English translation) gives the integral but still fragmentary manuscript text from which the first published volumes were drawn.

A systematic interpretation of her work is problematical and, besides, could do her sometimes brilliant, sometimes obscure, paradoxical writing scant justice. Her thought is concentrated in two areas, the social and metaphysical, linked by her special concept of the human person. In a universe ruled by an iron, impersonal necessity, the human being shows an ineradicable expectation of goodness that is the sacred part of the human person. Society, the collective in whatever form, is the “large animal” offering the individual a false transcendency. Modern industrial society uproots but offers no values corresponding to the sacred aspirations of the individual. Not until labor and thought coincide and work is reintegrated into the spiritual edifice of society will the individual regain a sense of freedom, dignity, and community.

Central to Weil’s thought is the fundamental human frustration caused by the inherent contradiction between two forces—the rigorous mechanical necessity at work in the universe and the inner expectation of good. Weil developed her metaphysics from this central conflict. She presents a dialectic of divine creation and voluntary personal “decreation” or disindividualization whereby the creature relinquishes the particular and becomes annihilated in divine love through methodical destruction of the self. The destruction of the self is to be attained first by rigorous use of discursive reason pushed to its ultimate limits, at which point there will remain only a wall of unpassable contradictions representing the absurdities of the human condition. The second step is the way of the mystics and involves nondiscursive disciplines—attention, waiting, “transparency,” an inner void, and silence followed by certainty. Both methods of approach are apparent in her writing. Her God is impersonal and passive because all-loving. Only through a voluntary withdrawal of God could the act of creation take place. Evil, felt by man as suffering and apprehended by the understanding as the incomprehensible, is the paradoxical lot of the creature because of the nature of the initial act of finite creation by the infinite being.

See also Mysticism, History of; Mysticism, Nature and Assessment of; Platonism and the Platonic Tradition; Stoicism; Women in the History of Philosophy.

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WELL-BEING

See *Eudaimonia; Happiness; Self-Interest*.

WESTERMARCK, EDWARD
ALEXANDER
(1862–1939)

Edward Alexander Westermarck is best known as an anthropologist and sociologist; he is important in philosophy, however, as an exponent of a subjectivist theory of ethics, which he illustrated and supported by a survey of the actual variations in moral ideas. He himself made it clear in *Memories of My Life* that his interest in the sociology of morals arose from a concern with the philosophical question of the status of moral judgments and not vice versa.

Westermarck was born in Helsinki, Finland, of Swedish ancestry and was educated at the University of Helsinki. After 1887 he lived partly in England and partly in Finland, but he also made lengthy visits to Morocco from 1897 on. He was lecturer in sociology at the University of London from 1903 and professor of sociology there from 1907 to 1930; professor of practical philosophy at the University of Helsinki from 1906 to 1918; and professor of philosophy at the Academy of Abo from 1918. Westermarck did not marry, and his life was spent mainly in research, writing, and university teaching. On occasion, however, he joined other Finnish intellectuals in defense of their country's national interests, and he took a leading part in the founding of people's high schools for the Swedish-speaking population of Finland and of the Swedish university at Abo in Finland, of which he became the first rector in 1918.

As an undergraduate Westermarck became (and thereafter remained) an agnostic. The theme of his last book, *Christianity and Morals*, is that the moral influence of Christianity has been, on the whole, bad rather than good. He found German metaphysics distasteful but was attracted by English empiricism, especially that of J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer. This interest, together with the aim of using the library of the British Museum, attracted Westermarck to England. Through an interest in evolu-