

# Beyond the Saint and the Red Virgin

*Simone Weil as Feminist Theorist of Care*

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French philosopher Simone Weil died of tuberculosis and self-inflicted starvation in 1943, alone, at the age of thirty-four. Because of her tragic death, precocious mind, intense religiosity, and life-long dedication to ending working-class oppression and all forms of injustice, Weil was crowned after her death with the titles of “saint” and “genius” (Albert Camus and T. S. Eliot were just two among many who used these labels). She also came to be remembered as the “red virgin”—an engaged left-leaning intellectual who shunned the pleasures of the flesh and material comforts for the sake of justice.<sup>1</sup> Many biographers have commented at length on Weil’s discomfort with bodily contact, food, and sexuality (the disturbing subtext here is that it is *particularly* strange for a woman to eschew romantic love, children, or sex). Many more have commented on her almost complete silence on the significance of gender. Aside from a few (but important) comments in *La condition ouvrière* Weil rarely spoke about misogyny and repressive gender dynamics, and she said next to nothing about motherhood and the family. If Weil denounced in her writing the fact that oppression in factories was a lot worse for women than men (in light of an omnipresent sexism), this did not stop her from expressing, within the same text, great appreciation for men’s intellect and companionship and very little for women’s.<sup>2</sup> Siân Reynolds is right to conclude that “despite her lucidity about the plight of women workers, it is hard to find much evidence of genuine fellow feeling for them.”<sup>3</sup> And as her biographer Simone Pétrement has noted, Weil cursed the fact that she was born in a woman’s body and always did her best to suppress signs of femininity. This is perhaps not surprising given that Simone’s mother openly admitted that she much preferred boys to girls and that she always did her best to cultivate in her daughter what she considered to be masculine virtues.<sup>4</sup>

In light of all these observations some may be surprised to learn that over

the course of the last decades Weil's name has often been invoked in the work of feminist care theorists—most notably in Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries*, Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking*, and Nel Noddings's *The Maternal Factor*. Inspired by this body of work, many American and French scholars in sociology, medicine, and nursing have eagerly followed suit and turned to Weil—and most specifically to her concept of attention. In the eyes of many Weil's notion of attention is helpful for thinking about meaningful relationships between caregivers and care recipients.<sup>5</sup> Joan Tronto, for instance, believes that Weilian attention, because it is so radically other-oriented, is quite useful for capturing what is required for the good care of others: “one needs, in a sense, to suspend one's own goals, ambitions, plans of life, and concerns, in order to recognize and to be attentive to others.”<sup>6</sup> But there is something puzzling about the fact that the authority of Simone Weil has been invoked by a champion of “maternal thinking” like Ruddick and by scholars interested in developing an approach to morality and politics that is committed to ending oppressive patterns of care within homes and within political communities.<sup>7</sup> Did we not just see above that Weil displayed a striking lack of attunement to issues surrounding maternal love and gender? Should Weil's (almost complete) silence on matters related to gendered care practices and the family not give care theorists pause as they turn to her work? Over the next few pages I would like to show that dismissing Weil on that basis would be a mistake. The fact that Weil's account of human vulnerability, neediness, and duties is not gendered is one of the many reasons why we should attend to her work. While Weil may not be, on the surface, an author who can readily be labeled as feminist, I would like to show that her political thought and moral philosophy do represent an important intellectual resource for feminists today. More specifically, the goal of this paper is to show that feminist care theorists have only scratched the surface of what Weil has to offer. While Noddings, Ruddick, and Tronto are absolutely right to underscore the richness of Weil's notion of attention, I want to argue that we have not yet tapped into the most fruitful vein of Weil's thought: namely, the rigorous and nongendered account of needs that she offers in *L'énracinement* (*The Need for Roots*). A book Weil wrote in 1943 while serving the French resistance in London, *L'énracinement* has as its main objective to reflect on postwar reconstruction and on the principles that should inform the next French constitution. Never completed, this ambitious work offers an unforgiving critique of twentieth-century sociopolitical life—including (what is most pertinent for us here) a critique of rights discourse and a eulogy for the language of needs.

If care theory's main point of reference is “needs rather than rights” (as Nel

Noddings proposes in *The Maternal Factor*), Weil should make for a rather sympathetic interlocutor.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, from the very beginning the issue of needs has figured prominently in the care literature. Joan Tronto has argued that care theory is tightly anchored in an anthropology of needs, and Noddings has repeatedly underscored that one of the chief aims of care ethics is “to identify and respond to needs.”<sup>9</sup> For sociologist Sandra Laugier it is also evident that care could readily be encapsulated as “a practical response to specific needs.”<sup>10</sup> Given the centrality of the concept of needs for care theory, then, it would serve care theory well to accord greater attention to Simone Weil’s work. She, more than any other philosopher, based an entire sociopolitical theory on the very concept of need. To have needs is to necessitate care; to care is to be able both to recognize human needs in others *and* to address them. This paper thus proposes to enrich the theory of care by proposing a Weilian defense of the centrality of the concept of needs for theories of human welfare and justice. But the paper also has two subsidiary objectives: first, to set the stage for a long-overdue conversation between philosophers of needs and care theorists; and second, to introduce Simone Weil to students of women’s studies. Weil is certainly an unduly neglected author: if she died too early to leave behind a highly systematic and detailed philosophy, she nevertheless penned a series of essays that are remarkably rich and worth scholarly attention.

The paper will proceed as follows: after briefly discussing why the issue of needs has been fairly neglected in western political theory, we will examine Weil’s account of needs—as articulated not only in *L’ennracinement* but also in two companion pieces she wrote in the early 1940s: *La personne et le sacré* and *Étude pour une déclaration des obligations envers l’être humain* (*Study for a Declaration of Obligations towards Human Beings*).<sup>11</sup> In the pages that follow I will underscore the strengths of Weil’s account of needs and indicate why this account should be of interest to feminist care theorists. Now, with some important exceptions care theorists have been reluctant to phrase their claims in the language of duty or that of obligation—many have preferred to embrace the language of “responsibility.”<sup>12</sup> In some of its early versions at least the ethics of care has in fact been defined precisely by way of an opposition to Kantian and deontological moral theories. In my conclusion I will briefly note—with Weil—that the reluctance of some care theorists to embrace the language of obligation or duty is largely unwarranted. To complement an account of needs with a theory of obligations such as Weil’s does not lessen the significance of acts of care; it may rather be a way to diminish the harm that a rehabilitation of care could entail for those most vulnerable: namely, women.

Needs are part and parcel of everyday life: human beings are endlessly confronted not only by basic needs for food, hygiene, and sleep but also by significant higher needs for security, attachment, and intellectual stimulation. And yet, despite this “everydayness” (or perhaps precisely *because* of it), the question of needs has not been the object of significant scholarly study and discussion in political philosophy. With the notable exceptions of dedicated Marxists, of development experts in the 1970s (e.g., Streeten; Stewart), and, more recently, of care theorists (e.g., Paperman; Laugier; Noddings; Engster), relatively few have insisted on framing issues of justice in terms of needs; most have preferred the language of rights.<sup>13</sup>

This paper is not the appropriate venue to tackle at length the massive question of why philosophers have neglected the concept of needs—I can only briefly mention a few reasons for this silence. The first is related to what has just been noted: most needs are the plain stuff of everyday life, crude matters tied to necessity.<sup>14</sup> As such needs do not inspire our loftiest theoretical ambitions, nor does their fulfillment seem to represent a fitting (read noble) goal for the sociopolitical creatures that we are. (Hannah Arendt’s vision of politics, which scorns the “lowly” and “feminine” matters of biological necessity, of home care and of labor, could be invoked here as a perfect example of this type of logic—a highly problematic logic we will return to in our conclusion.)<sup>15</sup> Nel Noddings has also suggested that the reluctance to tackle the question of needs might be tied to a fairly widespread discomfort with Marxism and to the fact that needs are much more demanding than rights (a claim that is quite reminiscent of Simone Weil’s views on rights).<sup>16</sup> “When we acknowledge a need,” Noddings writes, “we may be called upon to do something, to give up something, or to respond sympathetically and effectively to someone, whereas acknowledgement of a right often means leaving people alone, not interfering.”<sup>17</sup> Another possible reason for political philosophy’s neglect of needs might be that needs have often been associated with women and also with weakness, dependency, or humiliation.<sup>18</sup> Needs claims are said to be shaming for those who express them; to consider ourselves primarily as needy creatures is disempowering and quite at odds with modern conceptions of agency. Others have argued that it is neither possible nor desirable for scholars to come up with lists of specific universal human needs (whereas it may be possible to do so with rights). To make lists of needs is to indulge, to borrow Lawrence Hamilton’s phrase, in a “dictatorship of theory.”<sup>19</sup> And besides the fact that people might have different views of what human beings need, list makers, it is charged, cannot properly address problems of *conflict-*

ing needs.<sup>20</sup> Critics of the language of needs have also suggested that even if we could somehow come up with clear lists of needs, what is not obvious is what sort of obligations (if any) would flow from these. And last but not least, what is also far from evident according to critics is how one could convincingly answer the following questions: On what sort of basis should one ground a theory of needs and obligations? A metaphysics? A utility principle? Human nature (a category that has taken quite a beating in the last century)?

Allow me to begin our discussion of Weil by first tackling this last issue—that of grounding. What I want to show is that Weil’s argument for a grammar of needs and obligations rests on a fairly thick account of human nature and on an appeal to experience and to the language of necessity. In her *Etude pour une déclaration des obligations envers l’être humain* Weil begins her analysis of needs by positing a fundamental equality among individuals: “All human beings are absolutely identical insofar as they can be conceived as beings made of a central exigency for good around which is disposed psychic and physical matter.”<sup>21</sup> This, at base, explains why all men and women are equally worthy of respect: there is, within each one of us, a fundamental expectation that good (rather than harm) will be done to us. This basic and universal expectation, Weil insists, defines “the essence of the human being itself and of its sensibility.”<sup>22</sup> When various privations and injuries are experienced (through severe poverty, violence, or sexual assault, for example), we are equipped to feel this harm not only via our bodily sensibility but also via this connection to the good.<sup>23</sup> (It is worth briefly noting here that female bodily integrity is something that profoundly concerned Weil throughout her life. She often, for instance, invoked the case of rape to sustain some of her claims about injustice, the limits of rights discourse, and the nature of human suffering. She also repeatedly alerted her readers to the terrible abuses suffered by prostitutes in France and to their unfulfilled needs for security.)<sup>24</sup>

In a manner akin to Rousseau, Weil argues that what prevents most individuals from harming others is a basic aversion to hearing a scream or witnessing a surprised gaze of protest in a victim.<sup>25</sup> Simone Weil is convinced that few can tolerate knowing that their actions (or inactions) may crush that basic anticipation of good that is found in fellow human beings. (It is not that Weil thinks people incapable of cruelty—or indifference for that matter. On the contrary she admits that this is a great danger, cruelty and indifference being the necessary consequences of a person who has become morally numb.) For Weil this abhorrence to seeing harm being done or needs being unmet is so fundamental that to speak of this harm in the language of rights is insufficient: when injury is done to people there is something much more profound than a mere infringement of their rights.<sup>26</sup> Something more fundamental is

violated. There is an important claim made here that resonates with much of the literature on care: namely, the idea that appropriate moral judgments and deeds are not always a matter of conscious or abstract reasoning, but often of intuitions, of sensibility and feelings.<sup>27</sup> Many care theorists could certainly appreciate Weil's conviction that there is such a thing as a basic and universal capacity to *feel* justice and injustice and that this capacity is partially rooted in our body, in the physical *experience* of pain.<sup>28</sup>

In *Lenracinement* Weil suggests that the human need for food is so self-evident and compelling that we should anchor our entire vision of politics in this most fundamental need: "If we asked this question in general terms to anybody," she writes, "no one would say that a man is innocent if, having food in abundance and seeing someone dying from hunger, he passes by without giving this hungry person any food. It is thus an eternal obligation towards the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one can help."<sup>29</sup> Weil argues that if individuals tried to put their interests and passions aside (no small feat), most would acknowledge that their obligation to answer a desperate need for food in a fellow human being is absolutely nonnegotiable. And this is one of the reasons why Weil is so convinced of the moral forcefulness of the language of needs (contra the language of rights): it rests on a fundamental, powerful, and universal intuition.<sup>30</sup> Weil is convinced that we all want to be in a position to say, upon our death, "I have never left someone suffer from hunger."<sup>31</sup> If Weil often appeals to Christian sources in order to defend some of her claims, she insists here that her defense of needs transcends all religious traditions and historical contexts. "The human conscience has never varied on this point," she writes in *Lenracinement*. Whether one speaks of pagan ancient Egypt or of modern (Christian) Europe, "everybody thinks of progress above all in terms of reaching a condition of civic life where people do not suffer from hunger."<sup>32</sup> And in fact one does not need any religious sensibility in order to experience in one's gut the compelling nature of the obligation to address hunger: atheists and agnostics of all stripes are equally capable of experiencing this. "Whatever their system of belief or disbelief," she insists in her *Étude*, all individuals are capable of comprehending the forcefulness of an invocation of need. While some may be skeptical of this apparently toothless intuitive basis for duties to address needs, Weil is convinced that her appeal to a universal human conscience, to sensibility and intuition, may not be any weaker than an appeal to specific traditions, social structures, or bodies of law. On the contrary: for Weil positive laws and contracts can be quite vulnerable to human whims and power struggles. If we truly want efficacy, our obligation to answer the needs of others ought to be regarded as *unconditional*, eternal, and independent of all existing institutions.<sup>33</sup> But if our basic obliga-

tion to respect all human beings is not tied to any particular worldly convention or institution, Weil believes that the *expression* of this obligation is a different matter; here institutions, policies, and laws matter. In *Lenracinement* she explains that our universal obligation can only be fulfilled “if respect is effectively expressed in a real and nonfictitious manner; it can only be so expressed through the intermediary of the earthly needs of the human being.”<sup>34</sup>

In both our public and private lives, Weil insists, we should be subject to “a unique and perpetual obligation to remedy, proportionally to our responsibility and power, to all the privations of the soul and of the body susceptible to destroy or mutilate the earthly existence of a human being whatsoever.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, even if Weil believes that *all* individuals are obligated to address the needs of others, we see here that she injects into her theory a serious concern for particulars. For instance, Weil suggests that those who are economically privileged or who hold key positions of power or authority have greater obligations than others toward some fellow human beings. So even if all of us should take a general civic oath to remedy (as much as we can) all bodily and psychic privations, this oath should nevertheless be adapted to particular conditions and contexts (judges, high-ranking bureaucrats and politicians, police officers, and teachers would be asked to take different civic oaths).<sup>36</sup> I do not intend to discuss at length what an implementation of Weil’s theory would look like—partially because Weil was much more explicit (and rigorous) in her defense of principles than in her discussion of policy or institutional proposals. My point here is only to underscore the fact that despite her desire to propose a *universal* theory of duties towards mankind, Weil nevertheless insisted that we ought to factor in specific economic and cultural circumstances, as well as the particular distribution of power within a community or a particular workplace. As we note above, for instance, Weil argued that female factory workers were subject to even more oppression than men, and it is on that very basis that she argued that their situation called for specific correctives. While working out the competing claims of the universal and of the particular is no easy task (it is, perhaps, the most difficult task of philosophy), it is one that Weil insisted on pursuing throughout her intellectual life.

#### WEIL ON WHAT JUSTICE REQUIRES

In *Lenracinement* Weil separates needs into two categories: the needs of the body and the needs of the soul—and to each need she assigns a corresponding obligation. Weil proposes to tackle bodily needs first, because these are, in her view, much easier to enumerate and by far less contentious. Like the need for food (which we discuss above), all bodily needs are fairly evident *and very*

*compelling* morally because they are rooted in necessity: she insists that all human beings require fresh air, basic hygiene, medical care in case of illness, warmth, clothing, rest, lodging, and protection against physical violence (particularly sexual violence).<sup>37</sup> None of this is negotiable: without the satisfaction of these bodily needs individuals cannot thrive (and may even perish).

Now, surely there is nothing striking about Weil invoking the language of necessity when describing basic physical needs—most scholars interested in questions of human development and poverty have done so.<sup>38</sup> But what is worth noting is the fact that Weil also invokes the language of necessity when discussing the needs of the soul—that is, psychic and moral needs. She regards them as equally vital: “if they are not satisfied, the human being falls in a state that is more or less analogous to death.”<sup>39</sup> Her list of needs of the soul includes the following (note that they are presented by way of opposites—a significant fact to which we will return): equality and hierarchy; freedom and consented obedience; truth and freedom of expression; solitude and social life; private property and collective property; honor and punishment; personal initiative and disciplined participation in the community; security and risk; and last but not least rootedness (in a community, in a family, and at work).<sup>40</sup> While the needs of the soul are definitely more open to contention and harder to identify according to Weil, they are nevertheless things that most individuals are, at base, capable of seeing as essential.<sup>41</sup> Even if severe bodily deprivations are more likely to lead to an actual death than moral or intellectual deprivations, Weil argues that the latter are as serious: both sets of needs are key to a meaningful life. Both should be at the heart of a theory of justice.

We briefly note above that in the 1970s a few scholars, with some degree of success, convinced academic and political circles of the importance of thinking about problems of poverty, development, and justice in terms of needs. The Basic Needs Approach (BNA) was nevertheless largely discarded in the late 1980s, in part because of changing economic and ideological circumstances but also because some critics were convinced that the language of capabilities was more compelling and philosophically rigorous than that of needs.<sup>42</sup> If UN documents in the late 1970s were often peppered with the word *need*, the preferred term nowadays is *capability*. We need not enter into the minutia of the complex (and still raging) debate between the champions of capability and the champions of needs.<sup>43</sup> It will suffice to note here that many of the former considered that the BNA was paternalistic, that it cared insufficiently about freedom, and that it was guilty of what they called “commodity fetishism.”<sup>44</sup> In the eyes of Amartya Sen, for instance (the most eminent proponent of the capability approach [CA]), the vocabulary of needs assigned too much weight to material goods and gave insufficient attention to what individuals



in possession of these goods could actually *do* with them. The quality of one's life, Sen and many others insisted, could not be boiled down to such things as income or caloric intake.<sup>45</sup> Not only that, but others also charged that needs-based approaches to justice and development were unpersuasive because they regard the agent primarily as a passive (rather than active) being, and they are not tied to a rigorous philosophical account of well-being or happiness.<sup>46</sup>

Simone Weil may be instructive here, in part because her work suggests that a few of the charges made by capabilities theorists against needs-based approaches may be moot. For instance, when one looks to Weil's work, one is struck by the degree to which it is possible to talk very concretely about needs without falling into the trap of "commodity fetishism" (and without failing to consider seriously individual freedom). In fact, throughout her life Weil expressed concern about that very trap. In her early texts on Marx and factory oppression, for example, she was insistent on the fact that commodities were by no means sufficient signs of liberty and well-being. In her *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* she argued that true liberty would come, not from material comforts, increased wages, or ownership of the means of production, but, above all, from a worker being able to employ her intelligence and creativity at work, exerting control over her time and aspirations.<sup>47</sup> While I do not have the space to fully sustain this claim here, I think that at the end of the day there might only be a subtle difference between the concept of need (in its Weilian version at least) and the concept of capability—which in my view opens up interesting possibilities for theorizing justice and human welfare.<sup>48</sup> For instance, Weil's insistence on the *need* to be rooted at work is quite close to what Martha Nussbaum has in mind when she speaks of a *capability* to have "control over one's [material] environment." Nussbaum suggests that well-being entails "being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason, and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition."<sup>49</sup> Similar views are expressed by Weil in her early and late writings, especially when she describes ideal factory conditions as those that allow for workers to think, to exert control over their time, to bring their children to work when desired or necessary, and to experience true fraternity with fellow workers.<sup>50</sup> In these pages Weil clearly shows us that it is possible to speak concretely about needs without boiling things down to commodities. What is more, what Weil's oeuvre indicates is that—contrary to what some critics of the BNA claim—it is possible to have a theory of justice based in the language of needs and to have, at the same time, a philosophically rigorous account of human flourishing and a strong concern for individual freedom.<sup>51</sup>

It has often been said about Simone Weil that after her "religious turn" in her late twenties she became significantly less interested in addressing, politi-

cally, questions of material inequality, and poverty.<sup>52</sup> This interpretation is not entirely unreasonable: the “late” Weil does seem to embrace what will strike some as a fairly disturbing celebration of poverty and sometimes appears to elevate spiritual needs over material ones. In her late notebooks she often remarks on the “beauty of poverty” and makes the striking claim, in *Gravity and Grace*, that “workers need poetry more than bread.”<sup>53</sup> Not only that, but in her early 1940s writings she seems to be much more concerned about the significance of *love* and attention in one’s relationship with the afflicted (and with God) than with political activism.

Certainly one cannot deny the fact that the “old” Weil was more interested in deploying the power of love than the young Weil: a quick comparison of *Réflexions* and *Attente de Dieu* would suffice to indicate that. But I would like to argue that the increased interest she took in the affective and moral disposition of the person who worries about, and who fixes her attention on, needy individuals did not completely come *at the expense* of her concern for “action,” for addressing real material deprivation—rather, it complemented it. Allow me to refer to one passage from a late notebook, for it is a passage that would seem to lend credence to the view that Weil is calling for a sort of apolitical embrace of poverty: “There is in poverty a poetry without any equivalent. . . . To love the poetry of poverty is not an obstacle to compassion for the poor—on the contrary—since compassion is at the root of this poetry.”<sup>54</sup> If one stopped reading here, one might be convinced that compassion for the poor matters, but not that attending to material needs is imperative. But what follows is crucial: “The good works of compassion are not diminished either. . . . The love of poetry makes one *even more prone . . . to relieve suffering*.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, when Weil writes in *La personne et le sacré* that justice is about attention and compassion for the underprivileged (justice entails asking another “what are you going through?”), she insists that this is not *all* that justice requires. Rather, Weilian justice requires concrete actions meant to address needs—whether within one’s home or through large public institutions. To secure justice, Weil insists, not only entails *preventing* harm and the violation of needs but also requires us—when harm is already done—“to erase and remedy the *material consequences* of the harm” in question.<sup>56</sup> If material frugality certainly appealed to her, the “old” Weil was convinced that material destitution was a serious problem. Dire poverty not only causes bodily suffering but also humiliates; it makes one invisible. And, as we will see shortly, poverty is one of the most important obstacles to individual freedom according to Weil.

The reason why it is pertinent to underscore all this here is that feminist care theorists have sometimes been the object of the charge just discussed:

like Weil they have been (wrongly) accused of being much more interested in the cultivation of an affective concern for the needy than in the actual addressing of needs. To put it differently: some care theorists have been accused of choosing love and empathy over justice, emotions over action and politics.<sup>57</sup> Joan Tronto, Virginia Held, Olena Hankivsky, and Fiona Robinson (to name but a few) have all shown the extent to which such a charge is profoundly misguided: care theory has certainly moved beyond this simplistic dichotomy between love and justice, and it has for a long time now affirmed the importance of concrete practices and concrete political responses to needs. And yet, despite all this work, the accusation can still be heard in some academic circles. For instance, in a fairly recent article philosophers Gillian Brock and Soran Reader quickly dismiss care theory's account of needs on the basis of the fact that it privileges sentiment over deeds. Their article is one of the few that has explicitly tackled the question of whether care theory has anything to contribute to a philosophy of needs.<sup>58</sup> It is thus worth quoting at length:

It has been suggested that the ethics of care can comprehend the insights of a needs-centered approach. We question whether it can. Care-theorists make the concepts of vulnerability and care fundamental to ethics. They are right to be concerned . . . that the state of the needing other is ignored in mainstream moral theory. But *they propose the wrong solution to this problem. They invoke a particular affective attitude, care . . . supposing that this captures the essence of an appropriate moral response to a needing being.* From a needs-centered perspective, this is a mistake. On a needs-centered view, what matters for moral agency is that needs should be recognized and met.<sup>59</sup>

But this charge is imprecise: as I note above, most care theorists have been at pains to insist that to identify needs and to experience sympathetic feelings for the needy is hardly sufficient.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, many care theorists have argued that the *way* one cares for another human being is of profound significance (e.g., Kittay; Noddings), but most have taken their distance from exceedingly sentimental defenses of care—with some French care theorists going so far as to argue that we must completely “desentimentalize care” and move “beyond compassion.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, scholars like Joan Tronto, Patricia Paperman, Daniel Engster, Fiona Robinson, and Sandra Laugier have all insisted on the importance of accompanying any rehabilitation of the beauty and moral significance of care or of “maternal thinking” with a sustained “*political* reflection on resource allocation and social sharing of tasks . . . no ethics of care, therefore, without a politics.”<sup>62</sup>

So here too Weil's work might be helpful for care theorists—because she,

like them, wants both an ethics and a politics, both “love” and (social) justice. As I note in the introduction, numerous care theorists have appealed to Weil in order to think about the role of attention in caring activities and in moral judgment (sometimes, however, without sufficiently acknowledging the fairly radical and unsentimental nature of Weilian attention).<sup>63</sup> But they should perhaps now attend more closely to what she has to say about needs and justice—for Weil might provide them with new resources to completely overcome the widely criticized dichotomy between care and justice (a dichotomy that a few early defenders of care ethics implicitly embraced) and also new resources to “de-sentimentalize care.”<sup>64</sup> For one thing Weil’s view of love (and attention) was not in the least sentimental. Weil was convinced that the reason poverty and affliction are so remarkably painful is that they entail a kind of invisibility. The afflicted are not “seen,” not recognized by others. What attending to the afflicted can do (and such genuine attending requires love) is precisely to give them an identity and make them visible. In a well-known passage of *Waiting for God* Weil writes:

Love for our neighbour, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius. Creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying inert by the roadside. The Samaritan who stops and looks gives his attention all the same to this absent humanity, and the actions which follow prove that it is a question of real attention. . . . Love sees what is invisible.<sup>65</sup>

This acknowledgment of the other in all his or her particularity is more of a cognitive act of recognition than a sentimental experience of empathy (as Weil also highlights in her essay on school studies).<sup>66</sup> What this recognition brings about is an equality that is missing in the social hierarchies of our day-to-day world: love is thus, for Weil, the basis of justice. And it is precisely for this reason that Weil (a teacher by profession) was so deeply convinced that the cultivation of attention—an extremely difficult task—was the primary task of school studies. Indeed, if the faculty of attention was for Weil of utmost importance for prayer, she was also convinced that social justice could not be achieved without it.

Weil ought to be seen as an ally of care theory for more than simply her unsentimental treatment of care. Her conception of justice and rights might also be instructive for care theorists. Weil would certainly have had little sympathy for a Rawlsian conception of justice that almost exclusively prioritized universals, abstractions, and rights—which is the conception of justice that care ethicists have, on the whole, challenged.<sup>67</sup> But instead of eschewing the

language of rights or of justice altogether (as a few care theorists did in the 1980s), Weil would have proposed to reclaim the latter. This is indeed what she tried to do in her late work, asking us to discard for good the untenable (and modern) distinction between love and justice.<sup>68</sup> Weil was convinced that if we could somehow overcome that problematic split, the receiving of assistance and care from the state or from fellow human beings would no longer be regarded as humiliating or discretionary—it would, rather, become obligatory.<sup>69</sup> As we will see below, Weil was not naïve enough to deny that to experience dire need could potentially be demeaning (her experience with poor mothers working in factories taught her that).<sup>70</sup> But this is precisely why she argued that any good political theory should *begin* (rather than end) with the very issue of need.

What I have highlighted in this section is the fact that Weil’s account of needs and of justice, like that of care theorists, calls for both genuine concern for the plight of others *and* for concrete actions to address their needs. But there is a certain ambiguity in Weil’s treatment of affliction and poverty that I have not touched on. We have established that for Weil the love of poverty is in no way antithetical to “action”—to deeds aimed at reducing material destitution. And we have also noted Weil’s conviction that poverty must be addressed because it is one of the root causes of social invisibility, of a lack of recognition. But things are, in fact, a little messier than what I have suggested thus far. Weil’s conviction that poverty needs to be relieved seems to jar with a claim often made in her later work that great affliction represents a way for God’s grace to enter into us, to touch us. Not only that, but Weil also claims that paying genuine attention to a particular afflicted individual is one way for us to come into contact with the good and the true—with the divine. It sometimes seems as if the suffering of the poor is a good in itself serving as a springboard to the divine, which would raise the question of whether Weil would truly have thought the eradication of poverty at all desirable.<sup>71</sup> This would clearly be a misreading in my view, given her lifelong activism for the improvement of the condition of the destitute. Nonetheless there remains a difficult tension (that we have not the space to explore fully here) between her religious attachment to suffering and her striving for social justice.

WEIL ON CONFLICTING NEEDS, LIST MAKING, AND  
THE BANALITY OF VULNERABILITY

Now, if few of us would call into question the statement that all human beings need food or fresh air, some might be uncomfortable with the claim that equality or freedom of expression is universally required for well-being.

As Weil readily acknowledged, the needs of the soul are much more contentious, and there is nothing straightforward about making lists of them. I now propose to take a closer look at Weil's list of the needs of the soul in order to consider briefly the complex issue of the legitimacy of list making, as well as the problem of *conflicting* needs. These issues are important, for numerous scholars of needs (and of capabilities) have been showered with criticisms that are linked to these very issues. While we may not be in a position to offer an exhaustive response to all these questions here, we will still try to determine whether Weil's work could provide us with some elements of a possible answer.

As was mentioned above, Weil presents the needs of the soul as sets of opposites (e.g., liberty vs. obedience, security vs. risk, etc.). In *Lenracinement* she explains that "needs . . . must be combined in an equilibrium. Man needs food, but also an interval between meals. . . . The same thing applies to the needs of the soul."<sup>72</sup> Now, to speak of needs in terms of balance and equilibrium is not to speak of a virtuous mean between two (vicious) extremes. Weil's inspiration here is not Aristotle; Weilian well-being is not located halfway between excessive security and excessive risk or halfway between total obedience and licentious liberty. Rather, the needs implicated in a Weilian pair can only be satisfied *in turn*—precisely because she regards them as opposites that pull in different directions. As such one cannot address an individual's need for security and *at the same time* ensure that this person satisfies her need for risk. And yet (here is the great difficulty) a life well lived should include all this. She insists that we must try to organize our public and private lives in such a way that we find ourselves *as close as possible* to a sort of equilibrium between all needs. This is no small task, for human affairs are such that an individual will almost always be confronted with incompatible needs and duties. We could thus say that Weil's account of needs is at base tragic: needs cannot all be reconciled, and social life entails a (painful) plurality of conflicting goods.

That Weil thinks of needs and obligations in terms of pairs of (irreconcilable) opposites clearly sets her apart from many accounts of needs and capabilities—most notably Martha Nussbaum's. Nussbaum argues that scholars and policy makers should *not* work with the premise that there will be conflicts between goods and thus that prioritizing some might be necessary (or legitimate): "the capabilities are understood *as both mutually supportive and all of central relevance to social justice*. Thus a society that neglects one of them to promote the others has shortchanged its citizens, and there is a failure of justice in the shortchanging."<sup>73</sup> In Weil's view, on the contrary, there will *necessarily* be failures of justice; political theory ought to *begin* with this basic fact.

As I note earlier, one contentious matter in the literature on needs (and capabilities) is the suggestion that it may be possible and desirable to come up

with an explicit list of universal human needs.<sup>74</sup> Even among the most dedicated to poverty eradication one can find individuals who are convinced that for scholars and experts to make explicit lists is to impose on the non-western world (and especially its women) yet another colonial project; it is also to circumvent democracy.<sup>75</sup> Others argue that it is far too presumptuous to believe that philosophy could ever overcome its historicity and provide an objective account of universal needs. Others yet have claimed that there is a troubling paternalistic aspect to identifying people's basic needs. Nel Noddings, in her *Starting at Home* and *The Maternal Factor*, alerts us to the difficult conflicts between needs as expressed by the afflicted and those needs ascribed to them by caretakers, though she (unlike Joan Tronto) thinks the fears of paternalism (while legitimate) should not be overstated.<sup>76</sup> Many more objections to list making could no doubt be mentioned, but at the risk of oversimplifying, we could argue that many of these gravitate around the issues of the relationship between the philosopher and her community and what is a desirable relationship between theory and practice. As Rutger Claassen has argued, many critics seem to think that list makers regard themselves as philosopher-kings (or queens) whose primary task is to impose upon their communities—without any consultation—their lists.<sup>77</sup> One could mention the case of Nussbaum, who has been repeatedly (and quite rightly) blamed for imposing on women from the developing world an account of capabilities that is far too western, liberal, and hence colonizing.<sup>78</sup> No doubt one could find numerous readers of Weil who have felt uneasy about her own list of needs, on similar grounds. If Weil's life was too short for her to have had the occasion to reflect on this issue, it may be possible to piece together the answer that she may have offered her critics had she been the object of such a charge.

The first thing that should be mentioned here is that Weil always insisted on the fact that lists ought to be approved by the communities concerned, and they ought to *always* remain open to revision. In her *Etude pour une déclaration des obligations* Weil explicitly argued that her list of needs is not to be seen as final. If Weil is unwilling to compromise on the fact that we should think of justice primarily in terms of a list of needs and duties (rather than subjective rights), she is perfectly comfortable with the idea that the *content* of these lists should be an object of *constant* study and revision.<sup>79</sup>

Critics of list making have not been wholly satisfied by that kind of answer; witness how few of Nussbaum's dissenters have been persuaded by her insistent argument to the effect that her list is open-ended. Most continue to claim that list making is illiberal and disrespectful of both difference and democracy.<sup>80</sup> But we could perhaps nuance this connection between list making and contempt for democracy. Claassen has argued that—in some cases at least—it is the

champions of list making who are in fact more respectful of the claims of democracy and of the general public than scholars who refuse to draw such lists. Taking the *demos* and public deliberation seriously could be said to entail being willing to put on the table a detailed account of well-being for their consideration.<sup>81</sup> Weil would likely have had sympathy with Claassen's argument: she argued repeatedly that people from all walks of life are capable of grappling with complex philosophical texts and ideas—and that they should be presented with these.<sup>82</sup> More significantly, she also insisted that the philosopher best equipped to think of justice (and of lists) was he or she who was most capable of *listening*: listening to the voiceless, the afflicted, the “awkward with words”—to all those individuals who are rarely given the chance to speak publicly.<sup>83</sup>

In answer to the charge of illiberalism Weil would perhaps also have called into question the suggestion (made by some critics of lists and of the language of needs) that a commitment to an objective account of well-being *is necessarily at odds with* individual freedom (or autonomy). She might have argued that lists of needs (and obligations to act upon them) ought to be regarded as the essential prerequisite to any actual experiencing of freedom. There is no doubt that Weil genuinely prized *individual* freedom (witness, for instance, the passion with which she speaks, in *Lenracinement*, of political parties or of any institution that might stifle an individual's capacity to think for him- or herself). Indeed, one could go so far as to claim that for Weil the greatest political good is precisely individual freedom—which Weil ties closely to willful, free consent and to what she termed “methodical thought.”<sup>84</sup> In *Attente de Dieu* Weil defines justice itself as follows: “to pay attention to the afflicted as a human being and not as a thing, to desire in him or her the faculty of free consent.”<sup>85</sup> Here and elsewhere justice is explicitly defined in terms of protecting and enlarging the faculty of free consent; and she insists that the best politics will be dedicated to remedying what *inhibits* free consent in citizens—that is, poverty and all violations of the needs of the soul and the body.<sup>86</sup>

That said, one may still ask whether Weil's genuine interest in freedom really addresses the basic concern of many critics of lists: namely, that lists of needs fail to be neutral with regards to the good and are thus at odds with a serious commitment to pluralism. In a recent article on Nussbaum and Rawls Eric Nelson argues that scholars ultimately have to choose between moral and economic egalitarianism:

Moral egalitarianism (the idea that all individuals ought to be able to identify and pursue their own idea of the good life without coercion) and economic egalitarianism (the idea that coercion should be used to



ensure a more equal distribution of wealth) cannot easily coexist in the same theory. . . . These two philosophical positions developed in self-conscious opposition to the other.<sup>87</sup>

Nelson has put his finger on a tricky problem here. Weil seems to have thought that she could mix a commitment to individual (moral) freedom with a commitment to social justice (or economic redistribution). We could, with Nelson, question whether a reconciliation of the two is possible and whether one may not, in fact, have to compromise one in order to serve the other. (This would certainly sit well with Weil's tragic outlook on needs and duties.) It may be that, if forced to choose, Weil would have opted to prioritize economic egalitarianism. And if pressed by criticisms regarding her lack of neutrality about the good, Weil might have argued that the legitimate concerns critics may have about individual moral autonomy should never trump the crucial fact that billions of people have unmet needs for food, lodging, or decent health care. She might have asked her critics to consider that for these billions of disadvantaged individuals liberal qualms about autonomy are, at base, a sort of luxury most cannot afford. When the young Weil expressed her annoyance with fellow student Simone de Beauvoir's existential concerns over the meaning of life, she commented (albeit indirectly) on this very issue. After De Beauvoir told Weil that what mattered most for human happiness in her view was the meaning one gave to one's existence, Weil abruptly replied: "I can see that you have never suffered from hunger."<sup>88</sup> Weil's point was not that individual freedom or life's meaning did not matter. But Weil wanted to remind De Beauvoir that the importance of these questions should never eclipse the fundamental fact of physical deprivation and suffering.<sup>89</sup>

Before concluding, I would like to tackle the question of whether the language of needs is at odds with individual freedom from a slightly different angle, turning to the problem of humiliation. Some critics of philosophies of needs have argued that to phrase demands (on the state or on any fellow human being) in terms of needs is at base humiliating for the person concerned, for it seems to imply or increase passivity and dependence (as Sen has argued); it seems to represent a shameful "failure" in autonomy.<sup>90</sup> It is for this reason that some have argued that feminists should keep their distance from the language of needs and neediness. But I would like to suggest—with Weil—that there is no necessary humiliation involved in the expression of needs claims and the receiving of care if needs are looked at in their proper light and if they figure prominently in a political theory. For instance, if we begin with the premise that humans are *all* needy and vulnerable, neediness loses

some of its stigma, and interdependence is no longer seen as a failure. Indeed, if—like Weil—we were willing to anchor our political theory in the notion of need, we might remove part of the shameful aura surrounding most needs claims. Philosopher of needs John O’Neill writes:

A good social order needs to start not from the denial of common vulnerabilities but an acknowledgement of their existence. Self-deception about the limits of self-sufficiency and the extent of our neediness is not a proper basis for public policy that is concerned to foster properly autonomy and social independence. . . . There is no necessary conflict between neediness and autonomy. The acknowledgement of our dependence on others, both physical and social, need not be in conflict with a proper understanding of the virtues of the autonomous person.<sup>91</sup>

We have here a series of claims that are remarkably similar to those made by care theorists since the early 1980s. It is thus both surprising and unfortunate that there has not been much interest paid by philosophers of needs to care theory.<sup>92</sup> We have seen above that philosophers of needs Gillian Brock and Soran Reader have incorrectly accused care ethics of attaching too much importance to feelings and too little to politics. They have also discounted care theory for another reason: Brock and Reader are convinced that most students of care (unlike philosophers of needs) envision vulnerability as *exceptional*. Care theorists, they suggest, are “wrong to think that need is a relatively rare state amongst human beings. . . . The contrast with a needs-centered approach is striking here. *On our account of what a need is, everyone has them.*”<sup>93</sup>

But once again the charge is remarkably imprecise and fails to capture what most feminist theorists have argued over the last decades. In a manner akin to Weil most care theorists would agree with Patricia Paperman’s thesis that “vulnerable people are *not at all exceptional*” (this is a thesis that has been explicitly embraced by Joan Tronto, Daniel Engster, Virginia Held, and Sandra Laugier).<sup>94</sup> These scholars are all insistent that while care theory should be attentive to particulars and to context, it should, at the end of the day, be anchored in the recognition that neediness and vulnerability are also truly universal—and thus, in some respects, almost banal. In *Qu’est-ce que le care?* Paperman notes that “vulnerability and dependence are not accidental things that only happen to others . . . they are traits of the human condition.”<sup>95</sup> Like Weil (and like philosophers of needs) care theorists believe that a good political theory should *begin* precisely here: in vulnerability, in neediness. It thus seems that there is here the basis for a very good three-way conversation among feminist care theorists, philosophers of needs, and Simone Weil. It is time to have it.

By way of a conclusion I would like to invoke briefly the work of Hannah Arendt—which has exerted great influence on French and American political thought in recent decades (considerable enough that some speak of an “Arendt cult”).<sup>96</sup> Readers familiar with her work will recall that in *The Human Condition* Arendt expressed indignation about the fact that in the last two centuries questions of bodily needs, of domestic care, and of economics had come to invade (read spoil) the realm of politics, whereas they should have remained private matters. The normative subtext of Arendt’s discussion was that if one was interested in rehabilitating the dignity of politics, one had to find ways of pushing *back* “shameful” and “futile” matters of needs into the private realm.<sup>97</sup> This was the only way to ensure that politics would return to its truly worthwhile object: freedom. (On an Arendtian reading of civic life issues like daycare services, health coverage, elderly care, and problems of housing are *not political*.)

This Arendtian view—which resonates widely—is highly problematic (not only for women but also for all vulnerable groups in society). I would go so far as to assert that Arendt’s is a mistaken political project resting on a defective conception of needs and on a highly problematic split between the public and the private. I have noted above—with Weil—that it is possible to take the question of needs seriously without making material comfort the highest goal of politics and without disregarding the importance of freedom. More important, I have followed Weil in suggesting, contra Arendt (and contra many liberal political theorists), that needs are the matters of the greatest political concern and that one can derive a rich theory of justice and human welfare from attending to them. While I agree with Arendt that certain needs should be fulfilled within the privacy of our homes, many can be best addressed if public institutions, bureaucrats, and significant public resources are implicated in the process. And this is one of the numerous reasons why tying our account of needs to an explicit and nongendered theory of obligations (as Weil does) is so vital: because to speak of *universal* and concrete political obligations to address needs (regardless of one’s gender) may take some of the burden off the shoulders of those who are often hit when matters of need are confined to or pushed back into the home (thanks to cuts in the welfare state): namely, women.

Weil did not believe that the language of duties would compromise the significant role to be played by sentiment and attentiveness in the identification or the answering of needs—whether this was done by the state or by an individual. Contrary to neoconservatives who reject the idea of a “compassionate state” (in part because they believe that a generous welfare state would

kill the beauty of private charity), and contrary to those on the left who often insist on putting the burdens of care almost exclusively on the shoulders of public institutions, Weil argued that care (and compassion) should and could inform *both* our private and our public lives. Indeed, Weil's thoughts on needs (and care) largely challenge the public-private split that the likes of Arendt and many liberals have been so keen on (re)establishing and that feminists have—on the whole—been so interested in questioning. By attaching so much importance to the existence of *universal* and concrete *political* obligations to care for all those who suffer or who have needs in a community, Weil offered a theory that is, in my view, feminist.

What Weil tried to do in the early 1940s was to argue for the desirability of creating a truly compassionate *state* not only by making sure that adequate resources were there but also by ensuring that the basic functions of the state were fulfilled in a spirit of compassion. Hence she insisted on the importance of selecting particularly compassionate judges, police officers, educators, politicians, bureaucrats, and so on.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, for Weil compassion or empathy was certainly not the virtue of women (nor was it a virtue to be confined to the private realm); compassion was to be the virtue of all citizens (regardless of gender), and it was to be the basis for a radical politics. It may thus be worthwhile for feminist care theorists to return to Weil—but this time to look a little more closely at what she says about needs and at how she mixes the language of (particular) love and the language of (universal) needs and obligations.

#### NOTES

1. That nickname “red virgin” was in fact given to her prior to her death (the label goes back to her days at the Sorbonne). Canadian philosopher George Grant repeatedly employed the titles of “genius” and “saint” when discussing Simone Weil in his work.

2. There is indeed, according to Weil, an extra layer of oppression experienced by women, due to “le mépris des hommes pour les femmes.” In a letter to a factory director from 1936, Weil comments on the significance her gender had on her factory experience: “En tant qu’ouvrière, j’étais dans une situation doublement inférieure, exposée à sentir ma dignité blessée non seulement par les chefs, mais aussi par les ouvriers, *du fait que je suis une femme.*” See *La condition ouvrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 237. Cited in Nicole Maroger, “Simone Weil: Images de la condition féminine,” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 13, no. 4 (1990): 359; see also Siân Reynolds, “Simone Weil and Women Workers in the 1930s,” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 19, no. 1 (1996).

3. See Reynolds, “Simone Weil and Women Workers,” 105.

4. Simone Pétrement, *La vie de Simone Weil* (Paris : Fayard, 1973), 50. Pétrement

cites a letter in which Simone's mother writes: "j'aime et estime plus les garçons! . . . Jen suis toujours à préférer les bons petits garçons, bruyants et sincères, tels que je les vois à la sortie de Montaigne. Et je fais de mon mieux pour encourager chez Simone, non les grâces de la fillette, mais la droiture du garçon, même si elle devait ressembler à de la brusquerie."

5. See, e.g., Sandra Haegert, "The Ethics of Self," *Nursing Ethics* 11, no. 5 (2004); Agata Zielinski, "L'éthique du care. Une nouvelle façon de prendre soin," *Études* 4136 (2010). But both Ruddick and Noddings have reservations about Weil's work—especially about the importance Weil attaches to suffering and to a radical form of self-renunciation. See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 121–23; Nel Noddings, *The Maternal Factor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 47.

6. Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 128.

7. Naturally, not all care theorists are comfortable with the term *maternal*: many insist that care ethicists should eschew the labels "maternal" and "feminine" all together. For a variety of perspectives see Virginia Held, *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1995); Patricia Paperman and S. Laugier, eds., *Le souci des autres. éthique et politique du care* (Paris: EHESS, 2005).

8. Noddings, *Maternal Factor*, 180. As Sarah Miller also argues: "talk of need features prominently in the care ethics discourse. *More so than other philosophical perspectives*, care ethics investigates the subject matter of need in conjunction with both nurturing responsiveness to and responsibility for needs." See Sarah Miller, "Need, Care and Obligation," in Soran Reader, ed., *The Philosophy of Need* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141 (emphasis added).

9. See Nel Noddings, *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 53. On p. 57, she also writes, "care as a social theory is based on needs."

10. Pascale Molinier, Sandra Laugier, and Patricia Paperman, eds., *Qu'est-ce que le care? Souci des autres, sensibilité, responsabilité* (Paris Payot, 2009), 166–67.

11. Both of these texts can be found in Simone Weil, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957). *Lenracinement* quotations are all from Simone Weil, *Oeuvres*, ed. F. de Lussy (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

12. Most notably Joan Tronto, in *Moral Boundaries*. For exceptions see, e.g., Eva Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Daniel Engster, "Rethinking Care Theory: The Practice of Caring and the Obligation to Care," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 50–74; Daniel Engster, *The Heart of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

13. Paul Streeten et al., *First Things First: Meeting Basic Human Needs in Developing Countries* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981); Frances Stewart, *Basic Needs in Developing Countries* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). For a de-

tailed critique of rights discourse see Mary Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: Free Press, 1991). For an insightful reflection on the dichotomy justice/rights vs. virtue/obligations see Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For discussions of needs in political theory see Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Hogarth, 1990); Lawrence A. Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Nancy Fraser, "Struggle over Needs: Outline of a Socialist-Feminist Critical Theory of Late Capitalist Political Culture," in *Unruly Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

14. But one could suggest that this is precisely why the language of needs is so compelling. Sabine Alkire writes, "vital needs may have a claim to political attention because even if a person twists and turns to avoid them, the person cannot disrupt laws of nature, unalterable and invariable environmental facts, or facts about the human constitution." See her "Needs and Capabilities" in Reader, *Philosophy of Need*, 236; see also David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

15. For now see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), chap. 2. For a forceful critique of Arendt see Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

16. In *Waiting for God*, for instance, Weil points out that it is hardly surprising that moderns have chosen to see justice primarily in terms of rights rather than as a matter of obligations (and love). A justice based on rights is quite convenient, she suggests, because it easily dispenses us from *giving*, from answering other people's needs. See *Oeuvres*, 720.

17. Noddings, *Starting at Home*, 57.

18. For an insightful discussion of the issue of humiliation see John O'Neill, "Needs, Humiliation and Independence," in Reader, *Philosophy of Need*.

19. Hamilton, *Political Philosophy of Needs*, 12.

20. Amartya Sen, "Human Rights and Capabilities," *Journal of Human Development* 6, no. 2 (2005): 158. See also Amartya Sen, "Capabilities, Lists and Public Reason: Continuing the Conversation," *Feminist Economics* 10 (3): 77–80. For two solid discussions of list making see Alison Jaggar, "Reasoning about Well-Being: Nussbaum's Methods of Justifying the Capabilities," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, no. 5 (2006): 301–22; Rutger Claassen, "Making Capability Lists: Philosophy versus Democracy," *Political Studies* 59 (2011): 491–508.

21. Weil, *Étude*, 76. (Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the French are mine.)

22. Weil, *Étude*, 77.

23. Weil, *Étude*, 77.

24. See, e.g., *Lenracinement*, as well as a letter she wrote to her friend Albertine

Thévenon, in which she states: “I, too, feel like the sister of the street girl—of all these humiliated, despised individuals who are treated like garbage” (*La condition ouvrière*, 55).

25. Weil acknowledges that not all human beings will stop themselves from inflicting harm. Some may get great pleasure out of inflicting harm. See, e.g., *La personne et le sacré*, in *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 13.

26. See, e.g., Weil, *La personne et le sacré*, 27.

27. This ought to be accompanied with a word of caution, however. For many French care theorists it is of utmost importance to *desentimentalize* care—to put great distance between a politics and an ethics of care, and emotions. I will return to this below. For now see Molinier, Laugier, and Paperman, *Qu'est-ce que le care?*, 298.

28. “Le cri de douloureuse surprise que suscite au fond de l'âme l'infliction du mal . . . jaillit toujours par la *sensation* d'un contact avec l'injustice à travers la douleur” (Weil, *La personne et le sacré*, 16).

29 Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1029.

30. I don't have the space here to discuss Weil's complex critique of rights. But see the most insightful treatment provided by Edward Andrew, “Simone Weil on the Injustice of Rights-Based Doctrines,” *Review of Politics* 48, no. 1 (1986).

31. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1029.

32. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1029.

33. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1028.

34. Weil, *Oeuvres* 1029.

35. Weil, *Etude*, 78 (emphasis added).

36. Weil, *Etude*, 84.

37. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1029; cf. *Étude*, 81.

38. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1029 see also various chapters in Reader, *Philosophy of Need*.

39. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1029.

40. Weil, *Étude*, 81–83. Cf. *L'enracinement*, in *Oeuvres*, 1030–51.

41. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1030.

42. A survey of the criticisms against the BNA can be found Soran Reader, “Does a Basic Needs Approach Need Capabilities?” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2006); see also “UN Intellectual History Project,” briefing note number 2, CUNY Graduate Center, July 2009, [www.unhistory.org/briefing/8humDev.pdf](http://www.unhistory.org/briefing/8humDev.pdf). Paul Streeten himself, in a 1984 article, acknowledged that there were many “wholes” in the BNA. See Paul Streeten, “Some Unsettled Questions,” *World Development* 12, no. 9 (1984).

43. Soran Reader would like to “revive” the BNA approach (but would relabel it the “Needs Approach [NA]”). See also Alkire, “Needs and Capabilities.”

44. David Crocker, “Functioning and Capability: The Foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's Development Ethics,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 4 (1992): 590.

45. Amartya Sen, *Resources, Values and Development* (Oxford: Harvard University

Press, 1984), 514. Some have replied that such a criticism rests on a poor understanding of what most of them had in mind when using the term *needs*. See Reader, “Does a Basic Needs Approach Need Capabilities?”

46. Alkire, “Needs and Capabilities”; Reader, “Does a Basic Needs Approach Need Capabilities?”

47. See Weil, *Oeuvres*, esp. 325–35.

48. I am not the first to suggest that there are interesting parallels to be made here. See Engster, “Rethinking Care Theory”; Laurence Harang, “Care et politique: la voix des femmes,” *Le philosophe* 2, no. 32 (2009); Marie Garrau and Alice LeGoff, *Care, justice et dépendance* (Paris: PUF, 2010); Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* (see, e.g., 140).

49. Martha Nussbaum, “Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements,” *Feminist Economics*, 9, nos. 2–3 (2003): 42.

50. See *Réflexions* and *Lenracinement* (esp. part II) in Weil, *Oeuvres*; see also Weil, *La condition ouvrière*.

51 I do not have the space here to offer a detailed account of Weilian liberty. For a highly readable discussion see Mary Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine* (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988).

52. D. McLellan, “Simone Weil et la philosophie politique libérale contemporaine,” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 22, no. 2 (1999): 132. See also Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*.

53. Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Agora Pocket, 1991), 206.

54. Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, 181–82.

55. Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, 181–82 (emphasis added).

56. Weil, *La personne et le sacré*, 39; see also Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, 169. Witness also how she defines equality in her *Étude*: “Equality is the public recognition, effectively expressed via institutions and mores, of the principle that an equal degree of attention is due to the needs of all human beings” (81).

57. Not entirely unfairly, given that Carol Gilligan originally organized the debate around an opposition between a “care paradigm” and a “justice/rights paradigm.” But the majority of theorists have since then moved beyond this problematic dichotomy. Critiques of the dichotomy are numerous; I will only cite here Tara Smith, “Rights, Wrongs and Aristotelian Egoism: Illuminating the Rights/Care Dichotomy,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (Fall 1998).

58. If Reader and Brock dismiss the idea of marrying care ethics and philosophy of needs, Sarah Miller has offered a solid counterargument in her “Need, Care and Obligation.”

59. Gillian Brock and Soran Reader, “Needs, Moral Demands and Moral Theory,” *Utilitas* 16, no. 3 (2004): 264 (emphasis added).

60. To name but a few: Joan Tronto, Virginia Held, Patricia Paperman, Sandra Laugier, Daniel Engster.



61. Molinier, Laugier, and Paperman, *Qu'est-ce que le care?* Since Weil insisted that we should have both compassion and action (compassion being a spring to action), she would not have been willing to go as far as Molinier, Laugier, and Paperman.

62. Molinier, Laugier, and Paperman, *Qu'est-ce que le care?* 199–200 (emphasis added).

63. This is not to suggest that Weil thought emotions or love hardly mattered. But what Weilian attention does (as I indicate below) is provide not so much an emotional consolation to those in need but rather, recognition. As such care theorists ought to be careful not to sentimentalize Weil's notion of attention (or her notion of love for that matter). I am very grateful to one anonymous reviewer for correcting me on this matter.

64. Paperman, "Perspectives féministes sur la justice," *L'année sociologique* 54, no. 2 (2004): 421.

65. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 92. (The translation here is Craufurd's.)

66. In "Réflexion sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l'amour de dieu" she writes: "Les malheureux n'ont pas besoin d'autre chose en ce monde que d'hommes capables de faire attention à eux. La capacité de faire attention à un malheureux est chose très rare, très difficile; c'est presque un miracle. . . . Presque tous ceux qui croient avoir cette capacité ne l'ont pas. *La chaleur, l'élan du coeur, la pitié n'y suffisent pas.*" See Simone Weil, *Les écrits de Marseille*, in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), IV, part 1, 262 (emphasis added).

67. For just one of numerous examples see Molinier, Laugier, and Paperman, *Qu'est-ce que le care?* 97.

68. See, e.g., Weil, *Oeuvres*, 720.

69. See *Attente de Dieu*.

70. See her *Journal d'usine* (various entries), in *La condition ouvrière*.

71. I wish to thank one anonymous reviewer for alerting me to this very difficult (and disturbing) tension in Weil's work.

72. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 1033.

73. Nussbaum, "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements," 40 (emphasis added).

74. One of the best discussions of this issue is Jaggar, "Reasoning about Well-Being."

75. Sen, for instance, writes: "Pure theory cannot 'freeze' a list of capabilities for all societies for all time to come, irrespective of what the citizens come to understand and value." He insists, "That would be not only a denial of the reach of democracy, but also a misunderstanding of what pure theory can do, completely divorced from the particular social reality that any particular society faces." See his "Human Rights and Capabilities," 158. Philosopher of needs Lawrence Hamilton also shuns lists. See his *Political Philosophy of Needs*.

76. Noddings, *Starting at Home*, 65. On p. 137, for instance, she notes that "people

should not be allowed to sleep on the street (even if they claim this as a right), but . . . the relevant public must respond to complaints that shelters are not safe, hygienic or consonant with the promotion of human dignity. We ought not to be deterred by charges of ‘paternalism’ unless we are indeed guilty of exercising control without attentive love” (137).

77. Claassen, “Making Capability Lists.”

78. Susan M. Okin, “Poverty, Well-Being and Gender: What Counts, Who’s Heard?” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2003); Jaggar, “Reasoning about Well-Being.” For Noddings’s answer to the complex problem of the relationship between liberty and care, see, e.g., *Maternal Factor*, 202–4.

79. Weil, *Étude*, 80.

80. See, e.g., Jaggar, “Reasoning about Well-Being,” 320–21.

81. Claassen, “Making Capability Lists.”

82. Weil, *La personne et le sacré*; Weil, *L’être*

83. See esp. Weil, *La personne et le sacré*.

84. For her the whole point of working our way toward justice is precisely to enlarge liberty. See *Réflexions*, in Weil, *Oeuvres*.

85. Weil, *Oeuvres*, 728.

86. See the first part of Weil, *L’être*; Weil, *Écrits*, 51.

87. Eric Nelson, “From Primary Goods to Capabilities,” *Political Theory* 36, no. 1 (2008): 115.

88. See Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoires d’une fille rangée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). In an insightful article on Weil and Beauvoir, Geneviève Fraisse mentions the curt reply that was apparently given by Beauvoir: “Ce qui importe, mademoiselle Weil, ce n’est pas que les usines marchent, c’est que pauvres comme riches, barbares comme civilisés, sauvent leur âme.” See Geneviève Fraisse, “Le temps historique de la pensée des femmes,” *Cahiers Simone Weil* (Dec. 2010): 561.

89. And it is partially for that reason that Weil was so insistent that we ought to fasten our theory of justice to the very concrete and nonnegotiable need for *food*. In a manner reminiscent of Weil Nussbaum once replied to some criticisms with the following: “some human matters are too important to be left to whim and caprice.” See her “Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements,” 47.

90. Behind the charge rests the suggestion (noted above) that needs is a passive (rather than active) concept. To speak of needs means, according to Sen, to ask “what can be *done for* the person” (as opposed to asking “*what can the person do?*”). See Crocker, “Functioning and Capability.”

91. J. O’Neill, “Needs, Humiliation and Independence,” 97.

92. The most notable exception, once again, is Miller, in “Need, Care and Obligation.”

93. Brock and Reader, “Needs, Moral Demands and Moral Theory,” 265 (emphasis added).

94. “Les gens vulnérables n’ont rien d’exceptionnel”: Paperman and Laugier, *Le souci des autres*.

95. Molinier, Laugier, and Paperman, *Qu’est-ce que le care?* 93. See also Paperman, “Perspectives féministes sur la justice,” 427.

96. Walter Lacqueur, “The Arendt Cult: Hannah Arendt as Political Commentator,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no .4 (1998): 483–96.

97. Arendt, *Human Condition*; see, e.g., p. 73.

98. See Weil, *Étude*; Weil, *La personne et le sacré*.

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