Philosophy 177B: Simone Weil, cross-listed with Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, French and Francophone Studies, and Religious Studies
Spring 2016
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332 Rabb Graduate Center -- Office hours: M/W 2:30 – 3:30, and by appt.

Course description:

Although the mystical French philosopher Simone Weil is without doubt one of the greatest and most radical Christian Platonists since St. Augustine, as well as one of the most original political thinkers since Marx, she has always existed on the margins of academe. No one, it seems, knows quite what to do with her. She died very young (at age 34), and most of her work was assembled and published after her death based on her extensive Notebooks. Nevertheless, she has acquired something of a cult status among a small but significant number of writers, religious thinkers, social reformers, and academics, including her first champion, the great existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus, and no less a poet than T.S. Eliot. Iris Murdoch, philosopher and novelist, was also a great admirer.

Born before WWI, Weil died toward the end of WWII, having begun as a Marxist labor organizer (though trained as a philosopher) and ended as mystical Christian Platonist. Like Augustine, she attempted in her philosophical writings and in her life’s activities to bring together Athens and Jerusalem, to unite, that is, the Greek philosophical tradition, in particular Plato, with Biblical religion, in particular, the Christian Gospels. Her attempt to reconcile human suffering with divine perfection is as profound as it is disquieting. Indeed, much of her writing is discordant and disturbing, a slap in our face no less than a challenge to rethink our lives. Socrates comes to mind, as well as the ancient Hebrew prophets. The study of Weil’s life and work is an exercise that is at once philosophical, literary, religious, and practical.

Principal texts:
Francine du Plessix Gray, Simone Weil
Elaine Scarry, On Beauty and Being Just
Simone Weil: Gravity and Grace
Waiting for God
The Need for Roots
Letter to a Priest
Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value
Palle Yourgrau, Simone Weil
Supplementary Readings:
Selections from various authors, including I. Murdoch, E. Scarry, J. Carroll, M. Wyschogrod, Plato, et al.

The content of the course:

Part 1: Weil’s biography. (Cabaud, Simone Weil, A Fellowship in Love; du Plessix Gray, Simone Weil; Yourgrau, Simone Weil) Secular upbringing; Jewish heritage. Her relationship with her brother, the great mathematician, André Weil. Her early disengagement from all physical contact; her alienation from food, from her body, more generally. Early sympathy with the working class: “I was a Bolshevik by the age of 10”. Studies at Lycee and Ecole Normale in philosophy. Thesis on Descartes, but love affair with Plato. Encounter with Simone de Beauvoir; mutual suspicion. Teaching and labor organizing. Gradual disaffection with Marxism as a revolutionary social program; writes On Oppression and Liberty; “fight” with Trotsky. Leaves of absence from teaching to engage in factory work. “Soldier” against Franco in the Spanish Civil War; The Iliad: Poem of Force. Injured in war; recovery, and “epiphany” in Assisi: Christian revelation. Turn toward mysticism. Germany invades France: flight to Marseilles, encounter with the Catholics Fr. Perrin and Gustave Thibon; Gravity and Grace; Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks; flight to New York. Flight to London and the Free French. The Need for Roots, tuberculosis, death.

Part 2: Weil and Marxism. Her attempt to develop a new theory of alienated labor and freedom from oppression. Theoretical split with orthodox Marxism: dispute with Trotsky. Her experience working in factories. Discovery, there, that she is a “slave”; later that Christianity is the religion of slaves (Nietzsche agrees); identification, later, with that religion (for the very reason Nietzsche, and many modern “liberated intellectuals”, reject it). (Yourgrau, Simone Weil)

Part 3: Reflections on war. What went wrong in the Spanish Civil War? (Correspondence with Georges Bernanos) What went wrong with the Marxist revolution? Comparison with the Trojan War. (The Iliad: Poem of Force.) Pacifism; but then the Nazis. Gradual skepticism of “political” solutions to social evils, in labor, in war, in government (fascism, communism). Her final work on
reconstructing France after WWII. (*The Need for Roots*: a “revolutionary” proposal -- focus not on rights but on duties).


**First Paper Due**


**Second Paper Due**

**Part 7 : God and Good.** Weil’s “axiom”: God is essentially good. (*Gravity and Grace*; *Waiting for God*; Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*) Weil’s “theorem”: any assertion of God not acting in
consonance with the good is ipso facto false. Read the Bible via morality vs read morality via the Bible. (Yourgrau, *Simone Weil*; Kant and Plato’s *Euthyphro*)


**Part 9: Paradoxes in Weil’s thought.** (Can they be resolved?)

1. Beauty should be gazed at, not eaten; at the same time, aesthetes de facto belittle beauty, whereas it should be consumed or “eaten”.
2. God changes nothing; yet we shouldn’t approach God, we should wait for God to attend to us.
3. True religion is universal; yet Weil inclines to a particular religion, Catholicism, and is preoccupied by the symbol of the cross.
4. One cannot have direct, unmediated contact with God; yet at Assisi, Weil says “Christ” himself “came down and took me”.
5. The real miracle in Christianity is that goodness itself (not simply its reflection) can exist in the world; yet goodness, as such, does not exist in “the world of facts.”
6. Collectivity, the “great beast” of Plato’s *Republic*, is a primary source of evil; yet in *The Need for Roots*, Weil says that only the collective can provide for a nation its spiritual roots.

**Third Paper due**

**Writing assignments (summary):**

Three short papers, 3 - 5 ppg, on an assigned topic. The final paper, on a topic chosen by the student, in consultation with the instructor.
Learning Goals:

Students will become acquainted with the extraordinary life and work of a neglected figure in the history of philosophy, and in particular, with the one of the greatest mystical Christian Platonists of all time, a modern figure who can be compared to St. Augustine. They will learn how Simone Weil’s turbulent life as a philosopher-turned-labor-organizer with Marxist sympathies became a highly unorthodox Christian Platonist. They will become familiar with her attempt to marry Platonism to Christianity, and with her highly controversial critique of much in the Hebrew Bible. Students will confront the many paradoxes in Weil’s thought, and will test the validity of Weil’s interpretations both of Plato and of the Bible. They will be brought to examine what it means to lead a philosophical life, a question first raised by Socrates, and to ponder the meaning, and the reality, of suffering in a world made — or so it is said — by God. They will examine Weil’s powerful attempt to relate the beautiful to the good, and relate her approach to Plato’s. More generally, students will learn how to relate ideas and universes of discourse that are traditional kept apart, such as God (and divine-being), human kind (and human-being, and eating, the basis of human life), the beautiful (and art, more generally), the good, suffering (and wretchedness), and love (and sexuality).

Attendance: Attendance is mandatory. Roll will be taken, and there will be a grade penalty for each unexcused absence, after the first.*

*Note: laptops, iphones, ipods, ipads, etc. are not allowed in the class. The only “I” permitted in the classroom is yourself.

**If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis and need to have special accommodations for this class, please see me immediately. Also please note that any case of dishonesty (cheating on a test, using materials, including from the internet, and failing to cite its origin) is a serious academic infraction and is subject to disciplinary action.

***Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).