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HOW TO CONCEPTUALIZE ‘CRIMES BEYOND WORDS’? SIMONE WEIL’S PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

It seems undeniable that there are certain kinds of wrongdoing which can hardly be described in terms of rights’ violations. Their wrongful character is so extreme that a different kind of moral language is indispensable to adequately capture their moral gravity. In this paper it is argued that such a language is provided by Simone Weil’s moral theory. The first part of the paper is an attempt at reconstructing this theory, highlighting Weil’s critique of the language of rights and analysing the ‘moral extremes’ that this theory embraces, viz. absolute goodness and absolute evil (which Weil calls ‘injustice’). In this part an attempt is also made at clarifying the normative relations between both ‘extremes’, which Weil did not discuss at greater length. The second part is a case study of a type of injustice, namely crimes committed against the indigenous peoples. In the last part a comparison is made between Weil’s and Hannah Arendt’s views on the legitimacy of using ‘absolutist’ moral language in the public discourse.

KEYWORDS

absolute goodness, injustice, rights, indigenous peoples, common humanity, *metaxu*, Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt

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absolutne dobro, niesprawiedliwość, prawa (uprawnienia), ludy tubylcze, wspólne człowieczeństwo, *metaxu*, Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt

1. CRIMES BEYOND WORDS

Even a cursory look at the history of humankind makes us realize that in its course certain types of wrongs were done – let me call them ‘crimes beyond words’ – that cannot be adequately described by means of categories we normally employ in our everyday moral discourse. One would arguably have a strong feeling of incongruence if, for instance, one encountered a description of the extermination of whole peoples or a description of some – extreme – forms of racial discrimination in terms of ‘moral wrongfulness’ or ‘moral badness’. These words do not seem to possess sufficient strength to capture what elicits such powerful moral indignation among those who hear about these kinds of atrocious acts. In order to properly name such acts, one is compelled to invoke the old-time word ‘evil’, which we typically wish to avoid, either because of its theological connotations, or – more commendably – because we cherish a well-grounded belief that its usage should be restricted only to those acts whose wrongfulness exceeds the measure of comprehensibility, i.e. to those acts whose wrongfulness is, in a sense, ineffable. But if we admit that certain, atrocious acts – like the Holocaust, or the extermination of indigenous people – ought to be called ‘evil’, and that by calling them ‘evil’, we move very close to the limits of moral discourse, we are still – as philosophers – obliged to try to clarify the content of this term; we cannot treat it only as an expression of our deepest moral indignation. Therefore, the question with which I would like to deal with in this paper is how this term is to be understood (even if approximately), and what are the misleading ways of filling in its content. In my view, many invaluable insights regarding these questions can be found in Simone Weil’s moral philosophy. The layout of this essay is the following. In section 2, I shall reconstruct Weil’s arguments for the claim that evil (understood as qualitatively different from mere wrongfulness) cannot be adequately defined in terms of rights’ violations, and that its most convincing definition is that in terms of ‘injustice’. In section 3, I shall present the ways in which insights from the previous section can be used with regard to a specific type of evil, viz. crimes committed against the indigenous peoples. In the final section, I shall reflect on the legitimacy of using the absolutist moral vocabulary in the public discourse; in this context, I shall compare Weil’s and Arendt’s views, arguing that the account of Weil is more compelling.

2. SIMONE WEIL ON THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE LANGUAGE OF RIGHTS

In her magnificent and profound (but, unfortunately, relatively little known) essay *La Personne et le Sacré* Simone Weil made a powerful case for the claim that extremely atrocious – evil – acts cannot be adequately expressed in the language of rights.¹ She asserted that the notion of right does not possess sufficient strength to perform this task. Instead of saying that extremely atrocious acts constitute a violation of rights, we should say, as Weil argued, that they are *unjust*, in the sense: *constituting an attack on the very humanity of the victim*, on what is *sacred* in him or her, and from which arises the fundamental expectation of each human being that evil will not be done to him or her.

But why is the language of rights inadequate in such cases (and, as we will see, inadequate even more generally)? One can distinguish in Weil's analysis several different, though interrelated, arguments for this claim. Firstly, *this language cannot mirror the moral gravity inherent in this kind of acts*. Accordingly, if we speak, e.g. about the suffering of a brutally raped woman, it would be a terrible understatement to say that her right to bodily integrity was violated, because something incomparably more hideous was done to her: she fell victim to *injustice*, what was done to her was *unjust*. It is a crucial thing to emphasize that injustice is taken here not in the sense of the kind of injustice dealing with distribution of goods or equalizing the claims in dyadic relationships (i.e. not in the sense of distributive or commutative justice), but in the sense closer to the Biblical meaning: as synonymous with goodness. Injustice, then, is an opposite of goodness: it is an attack on the very humanity of the victim, on what is sacred in her. Secondly, *the language of rights is, in a sense, immoral*. It is immoral because it is confrontational and self-centred. It is expressed in such statements as, e.g. 'you have no right to this', 'I have the right to that': these are statements which, as Weil claimed, imply the state of mind that excludes the virtue of charity. That is why, according to Weil, the language of rights is deeply un-Christian:² it can be instrumentally abused with a view to promoting one's own, egoistic interests. Thirdly, *the language of rights is also likely to be ineffective in the fight against*

¹ See S. Weil, *La Personne et le Sacré*, Paris 2017 (1942).

² She wrote suggestively and pointedly that one can hardly imagine St Francis speaking the language of rights (cf. S. Weil, 2017 (1942), *op. cit.*, p. 53). The question which may be posed in this context is to what extent Weil can be regarded as a Christian thinker; my view on this issue is the following: she had great admiration for many aspects of Christianity, particularly for its emphasis on the virtue of *caritas*, but she unequivocally denied that Christianity is in possession of the ultimate religious truth; as she put it, 'Catholic religion contains explicitly the truths that other religions contain implicitly and *vice versa*; different religious traditions are a reflection of the same truth, and probably they are equally precious' (S. Weil, *Lettre à un religieux*, Paris 1951, p. 44). So there can be no doubt that she was not a Christian believer.

most atrocious acts. It seems too weak – too little expressive – to be really helpful in the fight for improving the lot of ‘the afflicted’ (*les malheureux*), those whose suffering is most acute (amounting to the denial of their very humanity), and as such ineffable.³ It can also be easily abused (I shall return to this last point presently). It is worth adding, by way of a slight digression, that Weil also contended that an indirect argument against the language of rights is that it was invented within the Roman civilization, which she strongly detested as being, in her view, deeply inhumane, idolatrous of brutal force. She wrote that it is symptomatic that the ancient Greeks (whom she truly admired) did not know this notion; it was introduced only by the Romans, and that the rights of Roman citizens included also the ‘right’ to kill one’s slave.⁴ Weil’s extremely negative evaluation of the Roman civilization is arguably one-sided and not unprejudiced, though, it must be admitted that it is very originally argued, and even its extreme character may be counted as an advantage: as providing a counterbalance to exceedingly positive views of the Roman civilization, which can often be encountered both in the literature and in public discourse.⁵

For all these reasons, Weil insisted that the notion of right should not occupy the central position in our moral and public discourse which it currently does. It should not be removed but it should cede priority to the notion of obligation (as far as the formal side of moral discourse is concerned) and to the notions of goodness and justice (as far as the material side of moral discourse is concerned). Weil preferred the notion of obligation for two interrelated reasons.⁶ The first one is that it exhibits some connection with the material notions of goodness and justice, whereas the notion of right (due to its confrontational character) is in tension with these notions. The other reason is that, as Weil asserted, the notion of obligation is less susceptible to abuse: one can make good or bad use of one’s own right,

³ In Weil’s terminology there is an important difference between *malheur* (affliction) and *souffrance* (suffering); the former is an extreme form of the latter; it is suffering in which ‘the danger of the death of human soul’, of the soul’s ‘reduction to nothingness’ arises; cf. S. Weil, 2017 (1942), *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁴ See S. Weil, 2017 (1942), *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁵ For her critique of the Roman civilization, see especially S. Weil, *Quelques réflexions sur les origines de l’hitlérisme*, (in:) *eadem, Écrits historiques et politiques*, Paris 1939, pp. 11–47. This short, little known paper is a masterpiece of historical and philosophical analysis, whose depth can hardly be surpassed.

⁶ The arguments to be presented are supposed to speak for, as one can call it, the ‘moral priority’ of the notion of obligation over that of right. However, one should add that she also presented two arguments for, so to say, ‘logical priority’ of the notion of obligation: one of them says that one can imagine an obligation uncorrelated with a right, but each right is correlated with an obligation; the other says that if there were just one human being on earth, he or she would have no rights but would still have some obligations; cf. S. Weil, *L’Enracinement*, Paris 1949 (1943), p. 5. These two arguments are of course controversial but their closer analysis would take me too far beyond the scope of this paper, so I just confine the discussion to presenting them.

whereas the fulfilment of an obligation is unconditionally good, in all regards.⁷ This thesis may seem controversial at first sight, but if we reflect more closely on it, it seems to be really apt. Indeed, if an obligation is a genuinely moral obligation, it cannot be abused; it leaves no sphere of discretion in which the agent's will could put it to its own – egoistic – use. However, one could agree with this but point out that there are no moral obligations whose fulfilment may not have some more or less distant negative consequences. To this objection one could answer in two ways, defending Weil's claim: firstly, that this kind of imperfection of an obligation cannot count as its susceptibility to abuse; and secondly, that even this kind of imperfection vanishes if an obligation in question is a prescription of absolute goodness or a prohibition of absolute evil (injustice) as only good may follow from discharging these kinds of obligations. This is an important claim of Weil: that while inferior goodness may produce bad consequences, the highest – absolute/pure – goodness infallibly brings about goodness; the same regularity applies to evil: absolute evil always produces evil but evil as the opposite to goodness may produce good effects.⁸ In this place some explanation is needed regarding this opposition: absolute goodness vs inferior goodness.

Simone Weil understood (absolute) goodness as the supernatural love, as pure compassion, which can appear only if one turns away from the pursuit of earthly goods, if one reaches the state of genuine humility, of detachment from one's *ego* (the seat of self-centred desires, separating us from other people and from God), and, consequently, if one creates 'the void' in oneself (by understanding that the earthly things do not have absolute value). Goodness thus understood should not be opposed to evil conceived as 'merely bad'. If some variety of goodness can be opposed to evil thus conceived (as 'merely bad'), it means that it is, in a sense, at the same level as evil; it may be something which barely exceeds evil. She invoked a suggestive example to illustrate this claim: if we compare such pairs of oppositions (one being good, the other evil, both in the non-extreme meaning of these terms) as 'respect for private ownership vs theft', or 'putting away money in savings bank vs prodigality', or 'a decent woman (*l'honnête femme*) vs a prostitute', we shall notice the closeness of the components of each pair. Those 'good' dispositions are not that much better than their 'evil' opposites, they constitute a low form of goodness, the goodness 'from the criminal code', as Weil called it.⁹ Furthermore, in doing evil and goodness from this level, we may feel the same pressure of duty (e.g. the duty to sell at a possibly high price and the duty not to steal), which shows that both are, in a sense, on a par, that this kind of goodness is 'deprived of light' (genuine goodness, as Weil seems to suggest, does not create the pressure of duty but, rather, attracts by its beauty). In short, according to Weil this inferior goodness or virtue is a *degraded image* of

⁷ S. Weil, 1949 (1943), *op. cit.*, pp. 180–181.

⁸ See S. Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, Paris 1998 (1947), p. 226.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

absolute good, of which it is, additionally, more difficult to be repentant than of their negative counterparts.¹⁰

Considering all that has been said above, it is not surprising that Weil believed that the absolutist moral notions (goodness, injustice), as well as other related notions (truth, beauty, including moral beauty) ought to be present in public discourse (from which, as Weil claimed, they have been removed). They add depth to it and, what is important from the standpoint of the goals of this paper, they are necessary to describe the most atrocious kinds of wrongfulness. But is the absolutist moral language really legitimate in public discourse? I shall leave aside this problem for a moment; I will return to it in the final section. In this section, I would like to make three additional remarks.

Firstly, as we have seen, Weil provided an insightful and deep analysis of the notions of absolute goodness and of absolute evil (injustice). She advanced compelling arguments for the claim that evil (as opposed to absolute goodness, and not just to inferior form of goodness) cannot be adequately described in the language of rights but can only be described in terms of *injustice* (in the sense opposed to absolute goodness), i.e. of the violation of what is sacred in human beings. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that the analysis was mainly conducted at the philosophical, abstract level.¹¹ This is why, it may be worthwhile trying to supplement it with a psychological perspective. For instance, one can invoke in this context the consideration pursued by Kristen R. Monroe in her book *The Heart of Altruism. Perceptions of a Common Humanity*, in which she argued that the source of altruism lies in our capacity to discern common or shared humanity in other people; that an altruist has the special capacity to look at other people: to see in them not strangers but fellow human beings. Now, it can be claimed that failure to recognize or to discern common humanity in other people is one of the fundamental manifestations of injustice in Weil's sense; in other words, unjust people simply cannot adopt the altruistic perspective (in Monroe's sense).

Secondly, Weil's fundamental thesis is that while absolute goodness is the apex of morality, injustice is its nadir, and neither of them can be adequately described in terms of rights' fulfilment or violation. However, the point which Weil did not

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Although one can find in her writings also some valuable psychological insights. For instance, she formulated interesting – quasi-psychological – criteria of distinguishing good from evil (in their absolute forms). The first criterion is that if one contemplates a possible good act for a sufficiently long time, one cannot but perform it, whereas if one contemplates an evil act for a sufficiently long time, the temptation to perform it vanishes. Thus, in the state of perfect attention, in which *ego* disappears and which for Weil is identical with prayer, one cannot commit an evil act: when, in this state, one contemplates good and evil, good prevails immediately (cf. S. Weil, 1998 (1947), *op. cit.*, p. 212). Another criterion is that of reality: goodness gives more reality to people and things and evil diminishes their reality (cf. *ibid.*, p. 136). This seems to mean that, in doing goodness, we *recognize and respect* the reality of other people, and thus abandon an egocentric or even ethically solipsistic attitude.

make entirely clear concerns the relation between these 'moral extremes' (as one may call them). How, then, can one properly describe this relation? Arguably, it cannot be done in terms of their contradiction: an act which *is not* absolutely good is not *ipso facto* unjust (i.e. evil in the extreme sense of going beyond the violation of rights); similarly, an act which is just is not *ipso facto* absolutely good (it may be an inferior type of goodness, or evil in some non-extreme form). Thus, they are not opposed in the sense of contradiction but, rather, in a sense of contrariety (an act cannot be at the same time absolutely good and unjust but it can be neither of them). This seems rather obvious. More importantly, while acts of absolute goodness seem to belong (to use the traditional distinction from the Christian moral philosophy) to a class of counsels (supererogatory acts: not obligatory but praiseworthy), prohibitions of unjust acts are assuredly precepts (their fulfilment is not praiseworthy, and their violations are blameworthy). The peculiarity of prohibitions of unjust acts lies in that their obligatory character is *especially strong*: committing such acts ought to elicit an *especially strong moral condemnation*. At this point I depart, e.g. from above-mentioned Monroe's view, according to which the capacity to perceive a shared humanity in others is an exceptional feature, typical for a narrow group of human beings: true altruists. It may be the case that it is rare, but it does not change the fact that it should be required (as it involves a shift in perspective – from the egocentric to the universal – which, as it seems, is within reach of almost everyone) and the lack thereof is a grave moral failure. In short, acts of pure goodness have a different character than acts of justice: the former stand higher in the moral hierarchy than the latter; what is common for both of them is that they can be adequately (from the formal side) described only in the language of obligations (or supererogation) but not in the language of rights. This point will prove important in my considerations pursued in section 3.

Thirdly, one should also mention Weil's metaphysical claim that the sacredness of human beings, which makes the language of rights insufficient to express the most atrocious wrongs done to human beings, stems from the fact that our soul has the 'the impersonal' part, the part we can awaken thanks to our capacity for focused attention, solitude, silence, and which, as she contended, is a shield both against egoism and collectivism. It is to be stressed that the fact that Weil put so much stress on *l'impersonnelle* in human beings attests to her scepticism towards the concept of person as purportedly inextricably connected with the notion of rights and, consequently, as insufficient to express the gravity of wrongs that may be done to human beings. However, her criticism of this concept is not entirely clear, and also not entirely convincing. On the one hand, it seems that she finds it *too abstract* and thus not capable of capturing the individual character of human beings (as she wrote, if the bodily integrity of a human being is gravely violated, no harm is done to his or her 'person'). On the other hand, she criticized it as *too little abstract*, as too closely connected with the egoistic interests, and thus, arguably, as too closely connected with this individual character of human

beings. This looks like an inconsistent line of criticism. This objection could perhaps be refuted if we assumed that *l'impersonnelle* – the most precious part, in Weil's view, in human beings – is *simultaneously* abstract (precisely by virtue of its being impersonal) and concrete (because inextricably connected with the concrete human being *as a whole*). At any rate, I believe that the same goals – first, of avoiding a too abstract account of human beings, and second, of avoiding too strict a connection with egoistic drives, and thus giving due justice to what is 'the better part' of human beings – is achieved by the classical Christian concept of person as an individual substance of rational nature (proposed by Boethius and developed within Christian personalism). In other words, Weil's rejection of the concept of person may have been unnecessary given the goal she wanted to achieve, viz. providing metaphysical basis for her claim that there is something infinitely precious – sacred – in human beings, and also providing a shield between egoism and collectivism (if we live up to the dignified status implied by the concept of person, we are unlikely to fall into a trap of egoism or collectivism).

3. EXAMPLE OF INJUSTICE: CRIMES AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

In his book *Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*, Raimond Gaita made an attempt to apply Weil's considerations on goodness and evil to various concrete ethical problems. He interpreted highest goodness in the spirit of Weil's analyses as 'impartial, unlimited love',¹² inspired by the conviction that all human beings are *equally* precious, and precious *in the infinite degree*, that, as he put it, 'what is best in our morality is the faith that human beings are precious beyond reason, beyond merit and beyond what most moralisers will tolerate'.¹³ He invoked, as an example of this kind of goodness, the case of a nun, full of genuine, pure love and compassion towards the patients of a psychiatric ward, whom she is capable of treating respectfully and non-condescendingly; she sees in each of them an unconditionally precious – 'precious beyond reason' – human beings. Love with which she is filled opens her eyes to the dignity of all human beings, to see the 'invisible' – their infinite dignity. He also proposed an interesting application of Weil's concept of injustice, on which I would like to focus in this section.

In Weil's spirit, Gaita opposed justice to fairness; he claimed that while fairness is aimed at regulating relations between humans whose status of humanity

¹² R. Gaita, *Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*, London 2002, p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

is not disputed, 'acknowledgement of someone as human' is 'an act of justice'. I shall quote the relevant passage *in extenso*:

Acknowledgement of someone as fully human is an act of justice of a different kind from those acts of justice which are rightly described as forms of fairness. Fairness is at issue only when the full human status of those who are protesting their unfair treatment is not disputed. When they centre on the distribution of goods or access to opportunities and such things, concerns about equity presuppose a more fundamental level of equality of respect. If you are taken fully as 'one of us', then your protestation that equity demands that you receive higher wages or be granted better promotion prospects, for example, is probably an appeal to justice as fairness. If, however, you are regarded as subhuman, then it would be ludicrous for you even to consider pressing such claims, unless as a device to dramatise the radically different kind of equality that is really at issue.¹⁴

In this case he invoked the case of Australian Aboriginal peoples. In 1992, in the *Mabo* Case, the High Court of Australia granted Aboriginal Australians natural title to some lands taken from their ancestors at the time when Australia was settled by the colonialists. The core claim of this decision was the statement, contrary to the long-standing judicial line of argumentation deeply prejudicial towards Aboriginal people, that the lands at that time were not *terra nullius*, and that thereby Aboriginal Australians were unlawfully dispossessed. What matters for my considerations is a philosophical interpretation of this decision provided by Gaita. He argues that this decision was an act of justice in Weil's sense, as it amounted in fact to recognizing Aboriginal people's full humanity (and, by contrast, refusing in the past to grant them this status was an act of injustice); the earlier law, as he puts it: 'effectively denied them full human status, because it denied the depth of moral and spiritual being which alone makes dispossession such a terrible affliction and, thereby, a terrible injustice.'¹⁵ This denial, as Gaita (in Weil's spirit) insightfully argues, cannot be exhaustively explained in terms of harm – psychological or material – inflicted on the victims. Thus, injustice is an evil *sui generis*, which may involve harm of this kind but is not reducible to it. It is an attack, to use Weil's terms, on what is sacred in human beings, on their very humanity. If one insisted on using the notion of harm in this context, I think it could only be called 'metaphysical harm'.

I fully share Gaita's thesis that the court decision was an act of justice (in the sense of the rectification of the act of injustice in Weil's sense) towards Aboriginal Australians and therefore cannot be fully described in the language of rights. There is, of course, an important component of the rights discourse in this act, for, as its result, Aboriginal people received *the property right* to their native lands. However, there is much more to it, and this 'more' – the recognition of their full

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

humanity inherent in this act – can only be captured if we go ‘beyond’ the language of rights and move on to the sphere of, as one could call it, ‘moral extremes’ or ‘moral absolutes’ (my, not Gaita’s, term). More generally, I fully agree with Gaita (who strictly follows Weil on this point) that the language of rights is inadequate when dealing with the most atrocious forms of evil: when cruelty is done to someone, then to say that the victim’s rights are violated, is a form of too feeble protest; the proper one would be to say: ‘injustice is done to him or her.’ However, Gaita, similarly to Weil, does not make it sufficiently clear how one should qualify ethically *an act of justice* (i.e. *an act of removing or rectifying injustice*). Obviously, the qualification is ethically positive: but how positive, comparatively? When Gaita writes that the act of recognition of full humanity is ‘justice beyond fairness’, he seems to imply that this may be an act of higher goodness, similar to that done by the nun filled with unlimited love for other people.¹⁶ However, I doubt whether there is a similarity here: while we, indeed, should regard the refusal to recognize common humanity of other people as a form of injustice, as an atrocious deed that escapes our means of description, it would be implausible, in my view, to regard this type of recognition as some higher type of goodness. There must be some heroic element in an act of justice, something supernatural in this act (as in the case of the nun filled with unlimited love). There is no such thing in the case of recognizing humanity in the Aboriginal peoples: there is a simple, unheroic – and *particularly strong* – obligation to do that. And those who are required to discharge of it are required to do what should be absolutely simple to them (unless, perhaps, they have to oppose the pressure of the public opinion, though even in this case the non-compliance would have no justification). The nun’s deed is really a manifestation of pure, unlimited love. But, let me repeat, there is nothing praiseworthy in the act of recognizing common humanity of indigenous people: this is a matter of the most obvious duty. In this way, I return to the point already made in section 2: that there is an important difference between goodness and justice. The former cannot be a duty: it is in a way heroic, and therefore supererogatory, while the latter is a strong obligation, even if both belong to the sphere of morality which goes beyond the language of rights.

4. THE PROBLEM OF LEGITIMACY OF THE ABSOLUTIST MORAL LANGUAGE IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Weil did not go so far as to assert that the language of rights should be removed from the public (political) discourse (sphere). In her view, rights have their own

¹⁶ However, I must add that he does not make this point clear, so it is only my interpretation of his account.

place in this discourse, but the place is legitimate only if they are illumined by the words (or, rather, the referents of these words) from the higher sphere of morality (the sphere of goodness, justice, beauty, truth). It should be stressed how paradoxical this claim is. Typically, we regard the absolutist moral vocabulary as problematic, and thereby needful of justification, especially in public discourse. Weil turned this issue on its head: it is the language of rights which needs to be justified; the absolutist language is treated as obviously necessary. Without the detriment to the crux of the matter, let me pose the question of the admissible moral 'languages' in public sphere in a traditional manner: Does the absolutist moral language have *ratio essendi* in public sphere? I will compare Weil's answer to this question with Hannah Arendt's, and will argue that the former is more compelling.¹⁷

An important concept used by Weil in her considerations on this question is that of *metaxu*. This Greek word (usually translated as 'the middle region') refers, in Weil's conceptual scheme, to the sphere of middle values (*la région moyenne*): of non-absolute goodness and of non-absolute evil. It embraces 'earthly things': power, money, home, family, fatherland, work, 'protected' by means of such ethical notions as rights or democracy. In her view, these 'things' do not have absolute, intrinsic value, they are only means of reaching absolute values: of pure goodness, justice, truth, or beauty. Accordingly, the proper attitude towards them consists in recognizing their importance as means, *but only as means*; they should not be pursued for their own sake. Nonetheless, these 'relative and mixed goods', *have value*: they 'nourish and warm our soul', and without them 'human life, except for sainthood, would not be possible',¹⁸ so no one should be deprived of them and they should be respected. In fact, Weil wrote that we have to accept the apparently paradoxical situation that we have absolute obligations towards things of relative value, because two alternative options are clearly unacceptable: the first one consists in the total denial of their value and ascribing value only to the absolute (supernatural) values; and the second one consists in ascribing absolute value to things of relative value (which would amount to idolatry of family, one's country, the state, etc.).¹⁹ As we can see, Weil's radicalism is only apparent: she did not postulate to abolish the notion of rights or democracy – the notions from the sphere of *metaxu* – but she believed that *they are not sufficient even for political life*; they bring about desirable effects only if they are manifestations of

¹⁷ I should add that both philosophers were not engaged in an open debate on this issue; I also think they did not influence each other's views, or more precisely: Arendt was not influenced by Weil, and Weil could not be influenced by Arendt because she died before Arendt wrote her crucial works.

¹⁸ S. Weil, 1988 (1947), *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁹ In this context Weil made an insightful observation that one cannot respect *metaxu* of other people if one does not treat them precisely as *metaxu* (not absolute goods); thus, for instance, if I treat my own country as an absolute good, as an idol, I will be inimical towards other countries; cf. S. Weil, 1949 (1943), *op. cit.*, p. 101.

attachment to such values as goodness, justice, truth, beauty, all of which, as she asserted, are the image in our world of the impersonal and divine order of the universe.²⁰ She plausibly argued that, firstly, the fight against oppression is more likely to succeed if it makes reference to this higher realm of values,²¹ and secondly, that even initially legitimate claims of the oppressed may degenerate into crystallizations of vengeance or envy if they are not durably inspired by the values from the higher moral sphere. These values, as she claimed, should provide an inspiration for the institutions in which values from *metaxu* are embodied. What is more, she even suggested that we should think about ‘inventing’ other institutions in addition to those protecting rights, viz. such institutions which would protect us from the opposites of the highest goodness: from injustice, falsehood, ugliness. These institutions should discourage us from doing all those things which are contrary to pure goodness, truth, justice or love (e.g. she proposed establishing a special tribunal, composed of educated and morally impeccable persons, which would see to it that truth be respected in public discourse).

Weil’s views on the legitimacy of the absolutist moral language in public discourse are essentially different from Hannah Arendt’s, even though both philosophers shared the conviction that there is a qualitative difference between different grades of goodness and wrongfulness. Thus, Arendt claimed, similarly to Weil, that there are absolute varieties of goodness and evil which are essentially different from their inferior counterparts: while analysing Herman Melville’s novel *Billy Budd*, Arendt famously argued that there exists – and is indeed the subject of the novel – ‘goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice’.²² She defined goodness beyond virtue as ‘natural goodness’, and wickedness beyond vice as ‘a depravity’ which ‘partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual’.²³ She saw the embodiment of the former in Billy Budd, and the embodiment of the latter in Claggart. After Billy Budd killed Claggart, who bore false witness against him, he is judged (and sentenced to death) by Captain Vere – an embodiment of virtue. But, somewhat paradoxically, and contrarily to Weil, on Arendt’s understanding ‘natural goodness’ can act violently, it does not exclude committing a murderous act; as she wrote, ‘absolute, natural innocence, because it can only act violently, is at war with the peace of the world and the true welfare of mankind’.²⁴ Consequently, Arendt asserted that only virtue, not goodness, is capable ‘of embodiment in lasting institutions’; its function is not only to ‘prevent the crime of evil’,

²⁰ See S. Weil, 2017 (1942), *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²¹ Let me quote the original version of this beautiful sentence relevant here: ‘Seul ce qui vient du ciel est susceptible d’imprimer réellement une marque sur la terre’ (S. Weil, 2017 (1942), *op. cit.*, p. 60).

²² H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, London 1990 (1963), p. 83.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

but also to 'punish the violence of absolute innocence'.²⁵ As Captain Vere says in the novel: 'Claggart was struck by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!'; Arendt commented:

The tragedy is that the law is made for men, and neither for angels nor for devils. Laws and all 'lasting institutions' break down not only under the onslaught of elemental evil but under the impact of absolute innocence as well. The law, moving between crime and virtue, cannot recognize what is beyond it, and while it has no punishment to mete out to elemental evil, it cannot but punish elemental goodness even if the virtuous man, Captain Vere, recognizes that only the violence of this goodness is adequate to the depraved power of evil.²⁶

Thus, Arendt argued that since absolute innocence – natural goodness – can be socially dangerous, there is no place for it in social and political life; it cannot – and should not – be 'embodied in lasting institutions'.

In summary, both Arendt and Weil agreed that 'there is goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice', but while Weil believed that the moral terms used to describe those 'moral extremes' are not only admissible but also necessary in public discourse, Arendt strongly rejected this kind of claim. Clearly, the difference in their views on this issue assuredly flows to some degree from the difference in their understanding of absolute goodness: Weil's understanding of it makes it incompatible with violence, while Arendt's 'natural goodness' admits of violence. But one may conjecture, given Arendt's attachment to the idea of public sphere as a sphere *sui generis*, that she would uphold her thesis that there is no place for 'moral absolutes' in public sphere even if she conceived the 'moral extremes' in the sense given to them by Weil.

All in all, I believe that Weil's view is more convincing. There are too many examples of extreme forms of wrongfulness which cannot be adequately described in the language from the sphere of *metaxu* (including the language of rights) so that we could agree to eliminate the language of 'moral absolutes' from public discourse; this would make us helpless in the face of extreme evil. Furthermore, the sphere of 'middle values' acquires additional dignity if it is – in a more or less direct way – connected with the realm of 'higher values'; as Gaita aptly wrote, 'Our sense of the authority and dignity of law, by virtue of which we consent without servility to its jurisdiction over us, depends on our seeing it as answerable to a conception of justice that transforms and guides its practices and proscriptions.'²⁷ The question which remains to be answered, if we adopt Weil's view, is whether the connection should be provided through the medium of special institutions (as she postulated) or more indirectly: by opening public space more widely than it is practiced in contemporary liberal democracies. But this is

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁷ R. Gaita, 2002, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

a practical or technical question. The essential one is whether this kind of connection ought to be made at all. I believe that Weil provided powerful arguments for a positive answer to it.

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