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On recognizing the real: Beauty and affliction in Simone Weil

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Abstract

If the guiding question of ethics is “how should I live?,” then the guiding question of aesthetics might be “what is beauty?” For Simone Weil, these two questions have intertwined answers that turn on a like conceptual apparatus. Focussing on Weil's foremost ethical problem, the plight of the afflicted (*malheur*), this article offers an account of the philosophical basis to Weil's claim that, when truly recognized, beauty and affliction motivate the same form of experience. I argue that, for Weil, both the aesthetic and moral disposition are grounded in an experience of the real, an experience that both requires and compels the subject to the same attentive state. Finally, I address the charges that might be leveled at Weil for suggesting that our experience of beauty is the same as our experience of affliction, specifically arguing that rather than this experience leading to a form of passive aesthetic arrest, as the experience of beauty has typically been theorized to lead to, Weil understands the experience of beauty and affliction as fundamentally motivational toward the Good.

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE EARLY WEIL AND HER INFLUENCES

In the history of Western philosophy, the connection between aesthetics and ethics, between the beautiful and the good, has been made by several canonical figures from the classical through modern period. Further through history, in the twentieth century, Simone Weil continues this tradition by making a connection between the beautiful and the good such that, at times, they appear to be synonymous. The development of Weil's thinking on the relation between ethics and aesthetics can be traced back to, but not reduced to, her engagement with two figures in the history of philosophy: Plato and Kant. Alongside Descartes, Plato and Kant are perhaps the cornerstones to Weil's specifically philosophical development, and their influence

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is seen nowhere more strongly than in her treatment of matters concerning aesthetics. Whilst Plato is most often associated with a *critique* of mimetic poetry and art in the *Republic*, and thus of sounding a warning about how art can lead us further from the truth, he nevertheless maintains a special place for the beautiful in his work. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, artistic beauty is associated with divine inspiration, and therefore is linked to the highest realm of truth in the Forms. Moreover, Plato also frames the erotic appreciation of human beauty as an effective step toward a full intellectual and moral education. As one commentator puts it, for Plato:

the amazed sight of a beautiful young man sets off an intellectual and emotional revolution: in looking with love at his beautiful beloved, the lover has taken the first step towards a better way of life, one involving right relations to his own body, to other people, and to the cosmos. (Lear, 2019, p. 26)

To this end whilst mimetic forms of art carry the danger of being a distraction to the good life, Plato nevertheless conceives of beauty as having significant moral instructional value in the cultivation of proper character and in our journey toward the Good more generally.

The connection between morality and aesthetics is also found in Weil's other great influence, Kant, who concludes the end of Part One of his *Critique of Judgment* with a section titled "On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality." There are several aspects to the connection between beauty and morality within this section, but two stand out.¹ Firstly, Kant tells us that just as the liking involved in a pure aesthetic judgment of beauty is disinterested, so too is the liking we have for the good (Kant, 1987, p. 229). What Kant is referring to here is how the condition of disinterestedness essential for a judgment of taste is also present in moral judgments. Despite there being a *liking* present in both the moral and aesthetic dispositions, this liking rests not on an interest *for* the morally good or beautiful, but rather it is an interest produced *as a consequence* of the pure aesthetic or moral judgment. For Kant, then, our experience of both the beautiful and the good mirror one another in both denying the presence of personal interest within their judgments, and because of this the beautiful can be seen as a symbol of morality. Secondly, Kant tells us that both moral judgments and pure aesthetic judgments of taste involve the condition of universality. Whether we make a judgment of the beautiful or a moral judgment, we make it for everyone, and we demand that everyone agrees with our judgment. In matters concerning taste or what we ought to do, each judgment entails a universality where one transcends private inclinations and judges on behalf of the human community.

The young Weil was keenly aware of both Plato's and Kant's positions on the beautiful and the good, and in a series of lecture notes taken by one of her students at a lycée for girls in Roanne in 1933–34—notes that have come to be known as the *Lectures on Philosophy* (LoP)—Weil imparts what she takes to be the central problems and elements of philosophical aesthetics.² However, despite Plato being a cornerstone to much of her later work, it is Kant who dominates her early lecture course "The Psychology of the Aesthetic Sense." Here there are four direct references to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, whilst there is only one to Plato. These are of course only the notes of a student, but they indicate that for the early Weil her

¹I note these two specifically because Weil herself draws on them in her *Lectures on Philosophy*.

²To get a sense of Weil's earliest thoughts on a subject, we can also turn to her early dissertation *Science and Perception in Descartes* defended in July 1930. Here Weil's dissertation takes up some basic questions regarding the structure of human subjectivity and action, and in this it is helpful in distinguishing Weil's early thoughts on those things that might indirectly contribute to an aesthetic theory, such as her thoughts on the nature of sensory knowledge, human activity and passivity, and so on. However, whilst her dissertation is useful for determining her position on the aesthetic in an indirect, more philosophically abstract sense, it is the *Lectures on Philosophy* that gives the reader the most direct understanding of her thoughts on the subject.

predominate influence in aesthetics is Kant, particularly when we also consider the implicit references to the third *Critique* found throughout.³

Within these lectures there are a variety of themes addressed, but what dominates is a thoroughly modern approach to the aesthetic in terms of determining how key parts of human physical and psychic life relate to our experience of art and the beautiful. Here the lecture is broken down into various sections that ask after the way in which the *body*, *feeling*, the *mind*, and *understanding* relate to the beautiful, before a short concluding section titled “The Moral Value of Art.” That the lecture course finishes by linking morality and aesthetics (for the notes discuss beauty as well as art) suggests that even from this early age Weil took the culmination of a study of aesthetics to be a question of how beauty and art relate to the moral life, thereby continuing the interests of her precursors Kant and Plato.

Much of Weil's use of Plato and Kant in these early lectures on aesthetics can be found throughout her later thought, albeit in different ways. Indeed, if Plato can be said to take up the cosmic, more metaphysical position in her later thought, observable in such early claims as “beauty is a witness that the ideal can become reality” (Weil, 1978, p. 189), Kant provides her with a set of technical concepts that she continues to draw on when developing the connection between ethics and aesthetics in her late essay “Forms of the Implicit Love of God.” But such a philosophical genealogy is helpful only to a point, and Weil also moves beyond Plato and Kant to develop her own distinct understanding of the relationship between beauty and morality in her mature thought. This article will not attempt to develop an exhaustive account of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in Weil, the scope of which is far beyond one article. Instead, the following will progress through three sections and use Weil's concept of *affliction* (*malheur*) as the turning point to interrogate and better understand certain important features in the philosophical connection between aesthetics and ethics, and the problems that the closeness between the aesthetic and moral experience raises for her wider project. *Affliction* is key here because for Weil, I argue, our experience of both beauty and affliction are of the same kind, namely, an experience of the real, and in this they motivate the same movement toward the Good. To this end, her concept of affliction provides the point at which the aesthetic and the ethical meet in the attentive subject and it is, therefore, the concept through which their relationship can be best unpacked.

In order to do this, I firstly turn to the primary ethical concern for the late Weil, namely, the plight of the afflicted, those whom she understands as undergoing a particularly pernicious form of suffering. However, here I am less interested in what constitutes a life of affliction than in how affliction is experienced from without. In this section I unpack the philosophical ground to Weil's claim that a certain kind of discursive reasoning and its reflection in rights-based theories of justice fails to recognize the reality of the suffering it attempts to address. This failure of recognition lies in the very structure of human action. Here I argue that, for Weil, human thought demands that the subject pursue their desires and goals until presented with an obstacle that limits these goals. Such obstacles reveal to the subject an independent external world, a reality constituted by other subjects each with their own unique set of desires and goals. For Weil, I argue, beauty is one such “obstacle” to the aims of thought, since it provides the “shock of the real” and allows for a recognition of a reality beyond the ambitions of the self.

In Section 3 I unpack the basis to Weil's claim that beauty is a revelation of the real and an antidote to the failure of a certain form of ethical thought to recognize the real. In this, Section 3 builds upon the explanation of human action in Section 2 to suggest that, for Weil, beauty sheds the light of finality over a world that is often seen only as a means to human consumption, and in this it is one of the primary ways that the teleological bent of human thought can be obstructed.

³As when, for instance, Weil asks her students to distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime along evidently Kantian lines. See Weil (1978, p. 188).

In Section 4 I begin to develop the argument that, for Weil, whether experiencing beauty or affliction, we are confronted with the same thing, namely, a reality beyond the boundaries of the self. Key to this is the experience that both beauty and suffering motivate, namely, a recognition of things as ends in themselves, as finalities here below. However, in order to make sense of her competing claims that beauty is a finality in the world and that the only finality is found outside of the world, I then show how Weil makes use Kant's aesthetic concept of "purposiveness without a purpose." After demonstrating the Kantian basis to Weil's claim, I end by showing that, for Weil, both beauty and suffering are seen to motivate the same ethical demand of self-abdication, of *decreation*.

Finally, I address the charges that might be leveled at Weil for suggesting that our experience of beauty is the same as our experience of affliction, specifically arguing that rather than motivating a form of passive aesthetic arrest, as the experience of beauty has typically been theorized to lead to, Weil understands the experience of both beauty and affliction as fundamentally motivational toward the Good.

2 | REASON, MORALITY, AND THE AFFLICTED

One of Weil's foremost ethical concerns is the plight of the afflicted, those people who experience both extreme physical and social suffering and who, because of this, undergo a radical and unconsensual uprooting. And yet despite the gravity of their situation, Weil tells us that the suffering of the afflicted remains largely indiscernible to human experience. We do not recognize the afflicted for what they are because we turn away from their condition, and even if we do come face to face with them we are unable to recognize affliction for what it is, for the voice of the afflicted that would otherwise guarantee self-determination is mute. According to Weil, the afflicted may utter a cry that no one could mistake for anything but a sign of intense suffering, but "they are like someone whose tongue has been cut out . . ." (Weil, 2005, p. 91), and their cry remains unheard. A key feature of affliction, then, is that the afflicted are dispossessed of a voice to express their suffering, and because of this their suffering goes unrecognized.

Despite her sometimes-ambiguous language, Weil's emphasis when discussing the recognition of affliction lies less in the muteness of the victim and more in the willful deafness of the one confronted by such suffering. According to Weil, it is the nature of the human to turn away from affliction, because confronting it means recognizing our own exposure to the movement of force and seeing within that our own powerlessness to effect meaningful change in the world (pp. 90–91). Because of our fear of vulnerability, we become willfully blind to affliction, habituated to looking past it in the same way that we fail to see glass when we look through a window. Breaking this habit requires that the glass become opaque to us, and so Weil argues that in the same way light at certain angles reflects off glass and turns what was once transparent into a seemingly solid surface, so too do we need to turn to affliction in a particular way to render it perceptible to us. Weil explains the philosophical presuppositions to this important analogy in her essay "Are We Struggling for Justice?":

. . . human action has no other rule or limit than obstacles. It has no contact with realities other than these. Matter imposes obstacles which are determined by its own mechanism. A man may impose obstacles through a power to refuse which he sometimes has and sometimes not. When he does not have it, he does not constitute an obstacle nor, consequently, a limit. (Weil, 1987, p. 2)

Weil continues:

... whenever there is action, thought moves towards its goal.

... Where there are none [obstacles], it [thought] does not stop. Anything not constituting an obstacle to the substance of this action—for example men without the capacity to refuse—is transparent to it as is completely clear glass to sight. It is not up to it to stop there anymore than it is up to sight to discern glass. (p. 2)

Here Weil gives an account of human life and action as relational, suggesting that we are determined in our particularity by the obstacles that we confront. In virtue of being an embodied being amongst a myriad of other embodied beings, we find ourselves limited by things that, like us, strive to achieve the goals set for them by thought, goals that do not necessarily align with our own goals. The power of thought to set goals for the body is infinite—we can think whatever we please. But our power to act on our thoughts is limited by the reality of the obstacles we come up against, including both obstacles seen as external to us (the object blocking our path, the social structures we live within, etc.) and the obstacles our own embodiment presents us with (the obstacle of an exhausted body when it stands in the way of the ambitions of thought).⁴ Obstacles are what constitute the very being of our embodied lives, and without the resistance they provide to the aims of thought we do not find ourselves living in the “real,” but only in a solipsistic world devoid of the reality of others, and thus devoid of the reality of any form of freedom other than our own power of thought. Indeed, Weil is unambiguous on this, remarking that when we do come up against an obstacle to the goals of our thought we receive “the shock of reality” (p. 4). For the late Weil,⁵ then, what is most *real* about the human being is therefore not an infinite capacity for thought, but the ways in which this power is limited by material necessity, by the ways in which our actions are restricted by an outside world. This confrontation with an outside is the “shock of the real,” since it presents us with a reality beyond the false idea we have of ourselves as being fully self-legislating beings convinced of our divinity, an idea that Weil names the *imagination*, or *self*.

For Weil, the afflicted provide an obstacle to the goals of thought since their condition threatens our erroneous belief that we are the sole legislators of our actions. As Weil puts it, acknowledging the reality of affliction means saying to oneself “I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself” (Weil, 2005, p. 90). Affliction confronts us with the reality of our powerlessness, and our thought strives to look through this reality as it presents it with an obstacle to its aims. When face-to-face with affliction, then, we are confronted with the demand that the real makes of us, namely, that we stop pursuing an increase in our own power and instead attend to the needs of others.

And yet it is of the nature of an instrumental kind of thought that we do not stop pursuing the goals of thought and remain within a world of our own making. In “Are we Struggling for Justice?” Weil argues that reason demands that we aim to fully express our power and fulfill the objectives of our will whenever the opportunity arises, and that involves seeing through the obstacles that stand in our way.⁶ Here, reason and the will are seen to function in a way that

⁴For a detailed account of the problem of fatigue in Weil see Rozelle-Stone (2017).

⁵I say the late Weil, for Weil’s early work on the nature of the human being in *Science and Perception in Descartes* might seem to suggest a prioritization of mind in the being of human beings. See Springstead (1983, pp. 33–64) for an attempt to reconcile this problematic through the notion of “mediation.”

⁶In this essay Weil argues that true justice demands a “madness of love” that we “as reasonable people” do not possess (Weil, 1987, p. 10). This essay offers the most explicit critique of forms of justice that rely on an instrumental form of reason, including the notion of rights borne in the French republic of 1789.

justifies each. Insofar as the will aims at the pursuit and consolidation of power, reason justifies this and provides the tools with which it can be accomplished. Reason will make it clear to us how we might best express our power and strive toward our goals, and this involves making that which obstructs the fulfillment of our goals transparent to us. Thus, like the pane of glass that we see through but do not realize we see through, reason makes the reality of a world beyond our own narrow agendas transparent to us. As Lisa McCullough has pointed out, “The exercise of reason works to make things transparent to the mind, but Weil’s point is that we do not see what is transparent” (McCullough, 2014, p. 38). When reason is pointed toward the afflicted and oppressed, it looks beyond the reality of their suffering and sees only its own reflection in the ethical solutions it proffers, solutions that do not correspond to the reality of the problem they aim to address.

If the goals of the will and the language of reason were to make up our moral life, then any response to the afflicted would always be one that aims at furthering the one who reasons, rather than in addressing the needs of those who are subject to that reasoning. There may be times when what the will demands and reason enables corresponds with the needs of the afflicted, but Weil would argue that this is coincidental and does not reveal a genuine moral disposition. As has been argued by Richard H. Bell (1998) amongst others, Weil’s ethics is an ethics of compassion that turns on a moral vocabulary of recognition, attention, love, consent, and care. For Weil, these are the motivating forces of the truly moral agent, and whilst reason and its manifestation in rights-based theories of justice may give the illusion of equity and justice, the foundation of this response to affliction will always lack a true desire for the good of the one who suffers. Importantly, this does not amount to a sort of anti-intellectualism on Weil’s part. For Weil there is still a place for reason in the good life, but when reason operates in the service of the person, whether consciously or not, then such a motivation negates any true desire for the good, and thus negates any truly moral action.

For Weil, one of the most important questions for ethics is how and why human beings fail to recognize true suffering even when directly presented with it. Weil’s answer to this is that the very structure of human action prevents us from recognizing the will of others, for such a recognition threatens the belief in our own sovereign power, a belief that is an enabling condition to our active expression of power in the world. When affliction is truly recognized, we receive the shock of the real and come to recognize the needs of a world beyond our own. When recognized, such needs motivate the subject not to consolidate more power but to attend to the needs of others, to the empowerment of others. Such a relinquishing of one’s own power for the empowerment of the other goes against the prescription of reason, which demands that we fully express our power wherever possible. In this state of self-diminishment we begin to live a truly moral life that attends to the real and, with this, come to mirror the ultimate act of goodness in God’s own self-abdicating decreative act.

3 | BEAUTY AND THE REAL

If reason and thought make the ethical problems we come up against transparent to us so we might more easily achieve our own narrow goals and consolidate our power, Weil nevertheless suggests that there are *aesthetic* correctives to this. Indeed, Weil is clear, for instance, that certain literary authors (Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare [when he wrote *Lear*], and Racine [when he wrote *Phedre*]) render a service to the afflicted insofar as their works represent the truth of affliction beyond the structures of the sovereign will that obscure this truth (Weil, 2005, pp. 92–93). But it is in her essay “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” that Weil gives her most extended account of the role of beauty in the world, and thus of the relationship between beauty and the moral life. Weil’s essay is one of her longest and takes up three, or perhaps four, ways that one can love God without God being the

explicit object of that love. Of these various implicit forms of loving God, Weil names the love of beauty, which she identifies with love of the order of the world, as an implicit love of God.⁷ Here Weil emphasizes several key conditions of the beautiful. Firstly, Weil is clear that unlike those things we desire for the sake of something else (the desire for money as a means to power, for instance) beauty is always an end in itself and never a means to anything else. But despite this, Weil continues to emphasize that beauty does not contain any substantial content of its own, which is to say, it should not be understood as a tangible attribute of matter or unique form of substance. Emphasizing this last point, Weil continues that beauty exists only as a *relation* between sensibility and the world (Weil, 1983, p. 119) and, further, that “we do not in the least know what it [beauty] is. We want to get behind beauty, but it is only a surface. It is like a mirror that sends us back our own desire for goodness” (p. 121). And, finally, that beauty “. . . seems itself to be a promise and not a good” (p. 122). Taken together these passages make up Weil’s ontology of beauty and, despite its existence as an end in itself, point to the insubstantial nature of beauty. For Weil, (1) beauty exists only in relation to a sensibility, (2) it presents us only with an image of our own desire for goodness but is not a good in itself, and (3) it only ever promises but never gives.

If beauty is so fleeting and insubstantial in-itself, if it contains no content of its own but offers only a promise and a light shone on both self and world, how is it that it functions as an obstacle to the power of the will? Despite beauty not containing any substantial content, Weil nevertheless imbues it with a metaphysical weight that comes to determine its role in the moral life. Early on in her essay Weil makes an equivalence between the love of the order of the world and the love of the beauty of the world, which in turn leads to a second equivalence between *beauty* and the *real*. As she writes in her notebooks: “Beauty is the manifest presence of reality” (Weil, 1956, p. 360), and, again, “the beautiful = manifest presence of the real” (Weil, 2015b, p. 72).⁸ According to Weil, then, when we experience beauty, we are experiencing the real, for love of the order of the world and the love of the beauty of the world are “the same thing” (Weil, 1983, p. 115).

But what exactly does Weil understand by the “real” here? For Weil, the order of the world is the blind mechanical necessity of nature, and the obedience of matter to this order is the real. Thus, for Weil beauty is the revealing to human experience of the operations of necessity and the obedience of matter to that order. Importantly this means that in the experience of the beautiful we experience reality as it exists untainted by the long shadow of the person. And so whereas we typically experience a world that is ordered and explained according to the needs and desires of the self, in the experience of the beautiful we see the world *as if we were not in it*. All experiences of beauty are therefore experiences of a reality beyond our own existence, experiences of decentering (Weil, 1983, p. 115), and therefore for Weil the aesthetic experience will always contain the moral imperative of decreation.

For Weil, beauty illuminates what is in the shadow of the imagination and makes manifest a reality outside an image of the world that is coded with the desires and motivations of the self. To this extent beauty is a light shone on the real, and in this it is impossible to grasp, define, or determine, but nevertheless has a presence that human beings are convinced of. As Weil remarks, beauty sheds a luster of finality upon those things that are only means (Weil, 1983, p. 122), which is to say, beauty allows us to see the world outside of the illusory desires and needs that we project onto the world and which determine our relation to it. If in everyday forms of experience the human being experiences the objects and persons of the world as means to the ends of their own desires, in the experience of beauty things are revealed in the light of finality, as having an independent causal reality as full and proper as the reality of the one who perceives. Importantly,

⁷And yet despite the importance of beauty in essays such as these, commentators have noted that Weil’s remarks on beauty have been, in the main, ignored by both aestheticians and theologians alike. On this see Sherry (1993).

⁸See also Weil (1956, pp. 309, 361, 387, 2015b, p. 77).

however, this is not an ontological form of finality, because as Weil is quick to argue, there is no finality to necessity. Rather, beauty paints the world with finality understood as a relation between sensibility and the world, a finality that has a *relational* reality but is not ontologically inherent in the things that appear as ends. Here pure necessity takes on the *luster* of finality, and the things that make up necessity appear as having an independent reality of their own, as having the form of finality, but without this finality having an ontological ground. As Weil remarks, “The absence of finality is the reign of necessity. Things have causes and not ends” (Weil, 1983, p. 131), and beauty dissolves the shadow of *personal* ends in the world whilst at the same time illuminating the objects of the world with a luster of finality that guarantees the recognition of their reality. I will further elaborate on Weil's claim that beauty sheds the luster of finality on the world with her contrasting claim that there is no finality in the world in the following section.

4 | BEAUTY AND AFFLICTION

In the above, we began to unpack some of the philosophical presuppositions that undergird Weil's claim that beauty is an experience of the real. For Weil, the real is the obedience of matter to the causal necessity of nature, and beauty is the revelation of this order to human experience. To this end, beauty is that which disrupts the human tendency to see the world according to their own agendas and purpose; it is that which reveals a world that unfolds according to its own mechanism, a world that has reality independent of the will that perceives it. But for Weil, it is not only beauty that has this unique revelatory function. Indeed, Weil repeatedly suggests that the experience of beauty and the experience of affliction are of one and the same kind, which is to say, the truly aesthetic and the truly moral disposition lead the subject to the same place of the recognition of necessity.

The claim that our aesthetic experience of beauty is of the same kind as a true experience of suffering may sit uncomfortably, but Weil's insistence that the experience of the beautiful is merely the revelation of the real begins to qualify how she draws this correspondence. As she writes in the notebooks:

To contemplate the woes of others without turning away one's gaze . . . that is beautiful. For it is contemplating the non-contemplatable. Exactly like contemplating some desirable thing without approaching it. It is stopping oneself.

Renunciation alone enables us to stop ourselves (ropes that pull at us, and which have to be cut), and thus to gain access to beauty. (Weil, 1956, p. 297)

Considering the above quote, there are two claims that need to be distinguished regarding affliction and the beautiful if we are not to bristle at Weil's claim of the closeness of the experience of beauty to the experience of affliction. The first is uncomplicated and is encapsulated in the above claim as to the beauty of attending to the other, that is, to the beauty of *compassion*. Here Weil says that the act of stopping and contemplating the suffering of others is beautiful. According to Weil, attending to the suffering of others is beautiful because it involves a renunciation of the self and a foregrounding of the real qua necessity. Since Weil equivocates between beauty and the real, any renunciation of the self that lets the real shine through is beautiful, and thus the moral act will always be a beautiful act, and all acts of true compassion will radiate with beauty.

But in addition to the act of attending to suffering being beautiful, Weil might also be seen to claim, whether implicitly or explicitly, that suffering itself, when recognized, is beautiful. Indeed, this is one of the objections that is sometimes made of her and can be seen in Susan Sontag's list of what she calls the “exaggerations” of Weil's life and ideas. In

particular, Sontag remarks upon Weil's "tireless courting of affliction" (Sontag, 1966, p. 51), a phrase which is suggestive of a quasi-divinization of affliction, a making beautiful of that which is typically thought the opposite of beautiful. Likewise, Mary Dietz also wonders whether Weil's work on affliction comes close to the latter's fetishization.⁹ Indeed, notes like the following seem to justify the accusation that Weil comes too close to making suffering something beautiful:

In beauty—for example the sea, the sky—there is something *irreducible; exactly like there is* in physical suffering: the same irreducibility; impenetrable for the intelligence.

Existence of something other than myself.

Relationship between Beauty and Suffering. (Weil, 1956, pp. 308–309)

The question then becomes: Does Weil believe that affliction in and of itself is beautiful? If this were true, then her insistence that "beauty is that which we cannot wish to change" (p. 637) runs into the charge of passivity in the face of suffering. Indeed, if affliction is met in the same way as we meet a beautiful poem, that is, "The poem is beautiful, that is to say the reader does not wish it other than it is" (Weil, 1983, pp. 130–131), then our attitude toward the afflicted would seem to amount to mere passive observation as to the rule of necessity in life.¹⁰ Whenever we experience affliction we would stop and admire, with no desire to intervene or change the object that elicits this experience, just as we have no desire to change a beautiful painting, poem, or sculpture. Indeed, Weil herself comes very close to suggesting this in the following famous analogy:

The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked. On the contrary this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience which constitutes the sea's beauty.

All the horrors which come about in this world are like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty. Sometimes a poem such as the Iliad, brings this beauty to light. (Weil, 1983, pp. 87–88)

According to the above, the beauty of the sea becomes greater when the indifference of its movements is manifest to the viewer through its destruction of human life. The blind movement of the waves under the power of necessity is the perfect representation of obedience and thus of the real *qua* beautiful. Weil then contrasts this imagery with "all the horrors of the world," which, she continues, are like the folds imposed on the waves by gravity. Like the folds of the waves, the various afflictions of the world are also instances of the indifferent weight of force, of a material necessity that does not discern between the various objects and people it consumes. For Weil, affliction lands indiscriminately upon those who find themselves in the material conditions that produce affliction. Thus, from

⁹See Dietz (1988, p. 120).

¹⁰Consider also: "Beauty alone makes it possible for us to be satisfied with that which is" (Weil, 1956, p. 596); "everything that is beautiful is an object of desire, but one does not desire that it be different, one does not desire to change anything, one desires the very thing that exists. One looks at the starry sky on a clear night and what one desires is exactly the sight that one has" (Weil, 2015a, p. 135); and "... the one thing we want is that it [beauty] should not change" (Weil, 2005, p. 92).

out of the necessity of social force come waves of affliction that are beautiful, for it is in these “social waves” that blind necessity, and the obedience of bodies to this force, can most clearly be observed.

According to Weil, then, an element of beauty can be seen in those areas of society that are most vulnerable to force, for here the powerlessness of the human in the face of necessity is clear for all to see. The discomfort we find in this claim comes from the fact that if we accept Weil's argument, then our aesthetic experience of beauty will be of the same kind as our experience of extreme suffering and affliction. But this feeling of conflict is only produced because the terms of Weil's argument are not the terms of common understanding. It is not that affliction cannot be beautiful, it is that we do not know what we mean when we say that something is beautiful. It is not inconsistent, or callous, to say that affliction contains an element of beauty if we understand that for Weil beauty is merely a light shone on the real, where the real becomes equivalent to the beautiful in aesthetic experience. This is also what the beauty of a poem entails—the *Iliad* is beautiful because it shows us a grain of the real. Likewise, the prison industrial complex contains elements of beauty because it reveals to us something real that is usually opaque to us, namely, the need of human life to be given a choice to consent to its conditions. As we saw above, both affliction and the beautiful stymie thought by presenting means as ends, by illuminating the world with the luster of finality that demands attention from the one who experiences it. No longer do we see the object of beauty or affliction as a means for the advancement of our own aims and desires, but instead we experience it as an end in itself, as a thing that exists outside of a world of our own making and which has a reality of its own. This is the force of experiencing the real, namely, the revelation of the fullness of an existence beyond our own, and this is what is called forth in experience when we perceive both beauty and affliction.

For Weil, what is key for enabling the experience of a reality outside of our own narrow perspective is that beauty and affliction shed the light of finality onto the world and in so doing reveal a finality beyond that produced by our own thoughts and aims. But Weil is also very clear that there is no finality to necessity, and the only true finality exists outside of the world (p. 131). Hoping to address this seeming contradiction in her thought, Weil turns to Kant's aesthetic theory in the third *Critique*. Here she informs her reader that the conception of an “end” that we experience in the face of affliction and beauty must be understood as an “end without finality,” or a “purposiveness without a purpose” as it is found in the third *Critique* (Kant, 1987, p. 66). To quote:

Beauty is the only finality here below. As Kant said very aptly, it is a finality which involves no objective. A beautiful thing involves no good except itself, in its totality, as it appears to us. We are drawn towards it without knowing what to ask of it. It offers us its own existence. (Weil, 1983, p. 121)

Drawing on Kant's concept of purposiveness without a purpose, Weil appeals to a conceptual apparatus that she hopes will allow for finality amongst necessity, without admitting of true finalities being directly present in the world. For Kant, a judgment of beauty must occur without any determining interests in the object of judgment, be they conceptual (a relation guided by the good) or sensory (a relation guided by what the subject likes in sensation). And yet despite an aesthetic judgment of taste being entirely disinterested, it must nevertheless be directed toward an object that emerges from our perceptual field as purposeful and distinct *as* an object of beauty. Kant's solution to this is to suggest that within a pure judgment of taste the beautiful emerges in experience as having the “mere form of purposiveness,” rather than as being experienced as having a determinate purpose that relates to an interest. As Kant writes:

Therefore the liking that, without a concept, we judge to be universally communicable and hence to be the basis that determines a judgment of taste, can be nothing but the subjective purposiveness in the presentation of an object, without any purpose (whether objective or subjective), and hence the mere form of purposiveness, insofar as we are conscious of it, in the presentation by which an object is *given us*. (Kant, 1987, p. 66)

What Weil takes from this is the argument that one can have finality within necessity, and thus finality in a world where things “have causes and not ends,” if the finality in question is simply the mere “form of purposiveness,” the mere *form of finality* of a being without there being a determinate end connected to the being in question. What the mere “form of purposiveness” looks like for Weil is not made explicit. However, a key condition for both Kant and Weil in the experience of beauty is the absence of any private determining conditions in the experience. For Weil, the beautiful involves a “finality with no objective,” which is to say, it involves the mere form of purposiveness without a purpose being traceable to the aims of the will who experiences the beautiful. In everyday imaginative forms of experience, things emerge as purposive with regard to the aims of the one who experiences. In this form of experience, things are seen only according to how they positively or negatively relate to the one who experiences. However, when beauty sheds the luster of finality onto a world devoid of finality, it shows things in a light where their purpose is connected to nothing other than the naked being of the thing itself, to their existence simpliciter. Experiences of beauty, then, dissolve the projection of personal ends onto the world and instead reveal things as ends in themselves independent of the one who perceives. As Weil writes, the beautiful object offers us “its own existence” (Weil, 1983, p. 121), an existence not determined by imaginary ends but by the sheer fact of its being.

The bare existence of the being revealed in aesthetic experience, or in the experience of affliction, is not a being determined by particulars; it is not a being that has blue eyes or long arms, who is a duke or a dustman, or who has any other particular trait. Rather, it is a human being *as such*. This is the bare life that Weil writes about in her essay “Human Personality” where she critiques “the modern trend of thought known as Personalism” (Weil, 2005, p. 70). Here she suggests that what prevents her from carrying out an injustice is not anything specific to the person of the being in question, but simply their existence as such, an existence that is universal and alike in all human beings. Like Kant, for whom a judgment of taste occurs at a level beyond particulars and is directed toward the mere “form of purposiveness” of a being, so too for Weil in the experience of both beauty and affliction a world is revealed to us beyond any prejudicial particulars, a world where the demands that the sanctity of life entail are recognized and confronted (p. 71). When life is devoid of particulars, as in the experience of beauty and affliction, the world's beings shine with the mere form of purposiveness, and any artificial difference between things is dissolved in the attentive gaze.

To return to the question of affliction, the “element of beauty” that affliction contains is precisely the absence of a projected goal, or end, that other forms of everyday, imaginative experience entail. As Weil remarks, beauty “offers us its own existence,” which is to say we do not ask of the beautiful anything connected to our own ends, but instead wait to see what its light reveals. Indeed, this is what occurs in a true experience of affliction where Weil argues we must first wait and listen for the voice of the afflicted before crafting a response. But whilst “waiting” here seems to suggest a form of aesthetic arrest where one stands silent and unmoved in the face of the beautiful and afflicted, this could not be further from the kind of waiting Weil thinks the experience of beauty and affliction entail. Indeed, contra what commentators like Mary Dietz have suggested,¹¹

¹¹See Dietz (1988, pp. 120–125).

the kind of waiting that both beauty and affliction engender does not lead to passivity, which is to say, to a form of moral or political inaction in the way that we may typically think of aesthetic arrest as leading to stasis. For Weil, beauty has such moral and political motivational power as to eclipse even our most basic drives for self-preservation, and in this the form of waiting she refers to is fundamentally active.¹² This is most clearly developed in her unfinished play *Venice Saved*. Here the protagonist of the play, Jaffier, comes to betray his friends and sacrifice his life to save the city of Venice from being ransacked. On being confronted with the beauty of Venice, a beauty which the character Violetta states “. . . is a better defense than that of soldiers, than the concerns of statesmen . . .” (Weil, 2019, p. 82), Jaffier comes to mirror the absence of finality found in the experience of the beautiful and acts not according to ends set by his will and carried out by reason, but by the recognition of the needs of a reality outside of himself. As Weil puts it elsewhere:

The imitation of the beauty of the world, that which corresponds to the absence of finality, intention and discrimination in it, is the absence of intention in ourselves, that is to say the renunciation of our will. (Weil, 1983, p. 133)

At the expense of his own life, Jaffier puts to one side personal ambition and self-preservation and acts instead to protect that which is under threat from destruction. Jaffier's moral action, his decreative act, is motivated by the experience of beauty as the real. In imitating the ontological structure of the beautiful as that which is without artificial ends, Jaffier comes to act in a way that aims to decenter the self and its aims in order to foreground the existence of the thing that is beautiful and/or suffers. Here the moral life becomes the beautiful life because both forgo the projection of ends onto the world and in doing so create a space for the real to emerge.

The closeness that Weil draws between the experience of beauty and the experience of affliction is, in part, built upon her understanding of the structure of aesthetic experience found in Kant's third *Critique*. For Weil, our experience of both beauty and affliction is a revealing of the real beyond the false ends projected onto the world by the person. In the experience of affliction and beauty, things that are usually experienced as mere means are seen in the light of finality as having a reality independent of the one who experiences them. However, for Weil, true finality is found only outside of this world. The form of finality that the world takes on in our experience of beauty and affliction is, therefore, a qualified finality, a finality without content. What this means is that things emerge with the *mere form of finality*, as having a purpose but without this purpose being determinate and traceable to a particular will. In this the world and all within it appear in the moral and aesthetic experience as having needs and requiring attention, but without our attention being directed toward anything particular that would render the moral or aesthetic disposition partial. Crucially, in both the truly moral and aesthetic disposition, the subject is not guided by any private interest, but by a general investment in the sanctity of life as such.

5 | CONCLUSION

The reception of Simone Weil over the past half century has been determined according to a perceived fetishization of suffering in her moral, religious, and political writings, often also confusedly related to her own private sufferings. Weil's writings do little to temper this accusation, and we have seen the uneasy proximity she draws between beauty and affliction, even going so far as to suggest that affliction itself is beautiful and that our experience of beauty and our experience of affliction are of one and the same kind.

¹²And yet it is not quite true that beauty eclipses our drive for self-preservation, but rather reorientates them away from the self. On this see Thomas (2022, pp. 6–7).

The proximity of affliction to beauty, of the aesthetic experience to the moral experience, should not come as a surprise. For Weil, what beauty demands, so does suffering, and the way in which they are met is alike. Both natural and artistic beauty, like those who undergo extreme forms of suffering, demand attention, which is to say, they each demand that the person who experiences them is diminished so that the fullness of the reality of the beautiful object or suffering person can come forth. Weil understood this confluence of experience, and her explanation of the connection between the ethical and the aesthetic turns on a recognition of the order of necessity that they each engender. For Weil, there is no finality to necessity and yet both the afflicted and the beautiful, when truly recognized, emerge in the light of finality as ends in themselves. The recognition of things as ends does not contradict Weil's claim that there is no finality in the world, and the above has shown how Weil develops Kant's argument that the beautiful object exhibits a purposiveness without a purpose to suggest that the finality we see in beauty is a "finality with no objective," the mere *form of finality*.

This article has developed certain key philosophical themes in the relationship between Weil's aesthetic and moral theory. It has argued that whilst Weil continues a tradition in the guise of her precursors Plato and Kant in connecting beauty and the good, aesthetics and ethics, she nevertheless takes the connection one step further, suggesting that the form of experience they both engender is of the same kind. Weil's insight that our experience of extreme suffering is the same as our aesthetic appreciation of beauty rubs against the grain of both aesthetic and moral theory, but her justification of this in terms of what a proper recognition of each entails is convincing. When confronted on their own terms, both beauty and affliction require that the person who experiences them be absent in the experience. As Weil writes in her notebooks: "Let me disappear in order that those things which I see may become, owing to the fact that they will then no longer be things which I see, things of perfect beauty" (Weil, 1956, p. 383).¹³ Where the subject is not, things emerge of themselves and according to their own history, a precondition to their proper recognition as things requiring attention. This is the only way we can truly experience both beauty and extreme suffering, and Weil's connection of the two confronts the viewer with the uncomfortable demand that it makes of us.

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¹³See also Weil (1956, p. 423).

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