At the Threshold with Simone Weil:
A Political Theory of Migration and Refuge

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Political Science in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The persistent presence of refugees challenges political theorists to rethink our approaches to citizenship and national sovereignty. I look to philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943), who brings to the Western tradition her insight as a refugee who attended to other refugees. Deploying the tropes of Threshold, Refuge, and Attention (which I garner and elaborate from her writings) I read Weil as an eminently political theorist whose practice of befriending political strangers maintains the urgent, interrogative insight of the refugee while tempering certain “temptations of exile.” On my reading, Weil’s body of theory travels physically and conceptually among plural, intersecting, and conflicting bodies politic, finding in each a source of limited, imperfect, and precious Refuge.

I then put Weil into conversation with several contemporary scholars - Michael Walzer, Martha Nussbaum, and Kwame Anthony Appiah - each of whom takes up a problematic between duties to existing political community and the call to engagements with political strangers. Bringing Weilian theory to bear on this conversation, I argue that polity depends deeply on those who heed the call to assume variously particular, vocational, and unenforceable duties across received borders.

Finally, by way of furthering Weil’s incomplete experiments in Attention to the other, I look to “accompaniment” and related strategies adopted by human rights activists in recent decades in the Americas. These projects, I suggest, display many traits in common with Weil’s political sensibility, but they also demonstrate possibilities beyond those imagined by Weil herself. As such, they provide practical guidance to those of us confronting political failures and refugee flows in the Western hemisphere today. I
conclude that politico-humanitarian movements’ own bodies of theory and practice point the way to sustained, cross-border, political relations.
For Gerardo, my host.
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2003-2004: I am living in Xamán, Guatemala, a community of Mayan-speaking families. Most are repatriated refugees, retornados, who spent years in exile in Mexico. In 1995, just after the repatriation, Guatemalan soldiers committed a massacre here. Every few weeks, I accompany survivors to court or to meet with their lawyers. My presence is supposed to deter further violence or threats to these witnesses.

January, 2004: My constant companion in this community, a twelve-year-old boy named Gerardo, dies in a Guatemala City hospital while undergoing treatment for chronic illness. His parents attributed his condition to injuries he sustained as a young child during the massacre. The government covers part of his medical expenses. To make up the difference, Gerardo’s parents sell off most of their land and livestock.

Summer, 2006: Two years later, I go back to visit. Gerardo’s father wants to look for work in Mexico or the U.S. He would have to go mojado – undocumented - but he thinks it might be worth the risk. One year’s pay as a migrant laborer could ensure the health and well-being of his surviving children.

Summer, 2008: I am volunteering for No More Deaths, a first-aid and rescue patrol working in the desert borderlands between the U.S. and Mexico. We distribute food, water, first aid, and information to migrants crossing over. The week before I arrived,
volunteers found and identified the body of a fourteen-year-old girl from El Salvador.

My group finds a young Mexican woman abandoned and unconscious. We call in Border Patrol helicopters to evacuate her. Later, we watch Patrol helicopters scatter migrants out of hiding by flying low and whipping dust and rocks into the brush. Isolated and possibly injured, they will face heightened risk of dehydration and death.

Fall, 2011: As I write, No More Deaths’ annual tally of migrant deaths in the desert stands at one hundred and forty-two. Counting deaths provides a powerful reminder of the stakes of political and humanitarian work, but I have undertaken to pursue questions raised by the diverse life histories of refugees, returnees, and migrants I have encountered. In that pursuit, I draw on the life work of one refugee and intellectual whom I encountered solely through reading: Simone Weil. It is my hope that an approach to politics informed by refugee perspectives can diminish the fatality and the frequency of that experience.
Introduction: Refugee Theory

A Theorist of Refuge

The twentieth century was christened “the century of the refugee.”¹ So far, the 21st century appears little different. In addition to those fleeing war, we observe increasing numbers of internally-displaced persons, metics, and undocumented migrant workers. The “climate refugee” and “economic refugee” have entered our political communities and scholarly vocabularies. The new names for refugee status do not imply unprecedented phenomena so much as increasing awareness of fissures in the Westphalian order,² cracks through which people keep falling out of sovereignty.³

What can the persistent presence of refugees teach political theory, a discipline habitually focused on citizenship and its protections? How might the refugee’s search for protected space inform critical challenges to the paradigms of citizenship and national sovereignty? In this our second century of the refugee, we seem bound to recognize both the importance of protective political space and the need for routes of escape across the borders of existing polities. How then should political actors and theorists proceed?


³ In the early 1980s the term “economic refugee,” for example, commonly preempted questions about the political dimensions of economic crises, the transnational causes of economic collapse, and policies that generate poverty. During Guatemala’s civil war, the Reagan administration falsely described those fleeing genocide as “economic refugees”, as a means to deny them asylum and to justify its continuing support for military dictatorships in Central America. Susan Gzesh, "Central Americans and Asylum Policy in the Reagan Era ", Migration Policy Institute (2011).
For guidance, I look to philosopher-activist Simone Weil (1909-1943). Although best known for her exploratory spiritual writings, her critique of Marxism, and her sensationalized early death, Weil’s most sustained efforts addressed the plight of refugees from diverse quarters. Under the shadow of total war, she housed, secured work for, and otherwise assisted numerous refugees from the Spanish Civil War, Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s USSR, and French imperialism. She hosted Trotsky during his exile in Paris, denounced the USSR for sending German refugees back from its borders, and helped the Red Cross repatriate conscripted workers from France’s colonies in Southeast Asia. She investigated the uprooting effects of industrial exploitation on French workers and the consequent attraction for them of the Soviet Union.

Then, when German tanks rolled into Paris, Weil became a refugee herself. She sojourned through Vichy France, a refugee camp in Morocco, and asylum in the United States before finally arriving in London to join General de Gaulle’s Free French Organization. Drawing on lessons of refugee experience (her own and that of refugees to whom she had attended), she applied herself to the problem of France’s post-war refounding. She called for a “new conception of patriotism” as a “diffuse” and “nomadic” sensibility, one in which those who, like herself, were alienated from the Third Republic and its Empire could come to feel “at home.”

Despite her resistance to conventional patriotic appeals, Weil greatly desired to return to France on clandestine missions for the Resistance. Unfortunately, the Free

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French leadership judged her a poor candidate for such work. She would never return home: one year before the liberation of Paris, Weil fell ill and died in England.

The portrayal of Weil as an exilic figure who valorized her outsider status has been facilitated by reading her death as a kind of suicide, a choice never to return home.\(^5\) I have chosen in this dissertation not to allow her death to determine the meaning of her life’s work. Focusing on her public writings (works she published, intended for publication, or distributed among the Free French) and her political activities, I read Weil as a theorist of refuge. In other words, I read her as an exile who prized shelter as well as migration, and who addressed metropolitan and imperial centers while attending to their peripheries.

Weil theorizes from “adverse times.”\(^6\) The recurring themes of “uprootedness,” shelter, and exile in her writings refer directly to the political exigencies she confronts. All around her, avowedly republican, constitutional, and revolutionary orders dissolve,\(^5\)

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Like Machiavelli, Weil regards adverse times as a combination of danger, opportunity, and test:

“(I)n normal times people … live, without the slightest inconvenience, with the most colossal of inward contradictions,” but “in times of supreme crisis the least flaw in the realm of consciousness acquires the same importance as if the most lucid of philosophers were at hand, maliciously ready to take advantage of the fact.” Weil, *The Need for Roots*. pp. 134-5. “The present period is one of those when everything that seems normally to constitute a reason for living dwindles away, when one must, on pain of sinking into confusion or apathy, call everything into question again.” Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans., Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London and New York: Routledge, 1958; reprint, 2006). p. 36.
degrade, and betray their principles and their people. Unable to assume the integrity of her polity, she interrogates legitimacy as well, highlighting processes of exclusion and conquest in the constitution, consolidation, defense, and perpetuation of political order. At the same time, she possesses a heightened sense of political order’s precious fragility and the devastation wrought by its collapse.

As a catalyst for theory, exile can induce myopia as well as insight. The asylum-seekers and refugees who populate introductory courses in political theory aptly illustrate both tendencies. Machiavelli, banished from Florence, exchanges civic pride for Italian patriotism, and he becomes infamously permissive with the means to his chosen end. Hobbes, driven abroad by civil war, grounds overwhelmingly sovereign power in an imaginary, pre-political “Unitie” of the people. Locke, hiding out in Holland, correlates consent and legitimacy to permissive rules of immigration and emigration, and he imagines the Americas as empty territory for those who would choose no existing European order. The great variety among these proposals and the shortcomings and dangers within them should prevent us from attributing a wholly benign influence to exilic perspective.

7 Machiavelli, p. 105.
10 Weil identifies several “temptations” of exile, such as sentimental idealization of the homeland or, in the absence of a tenable homeland, close identification with a “powerful, sovereign state” regardless of its other traits. Weil, *The Need for Roots*. pp. 178-9 and 197-8.
parties;\textsuperscript{11} restricted freedom of the press as a safeguard for free thought;\textsuperscript{12} and the death penalty for corrupt national leaders)\textsuperscript{13} have rightly troubled many commentators.\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, the exiled theorists share a focus on founding, boundary-drawing, inclusion, and exclusion as \textit{central} problems for politics. When we turn to them we recommit ourselves to the pursuit of these questions, and I locate Weil in their company.\textsuperscript{15}

That refugees appear at the margins of the modern discipline of political theory is both scandalous and wholly predictable. Refugees create difficulties for political order – just as political order, or its absence, or its corruption creates difficulties for \textit{them}. Their perpetual reappearance in polity’s penumbrae raises (or reorients us to) central, perhaps irresolvable questions. In short, refugees occasion political theory but they also make it

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[]\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. pp. 27-28.
\item[]\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. p. 26.
\item[]\textsuperscript{15} I do not share the refugee experience of Weil and the canonical theorists to whom I compare her. My own interest in refuge as a theoretical problem stems largely from my encounters with resettled refugees and migrants in the desert. Meeting them raised a set of questions that I now pursue as an academic theorist. In the interest of full intellectual disclosure, and at the risk of self-indulgence, I will say that Weil first appealed to me because of her position “on the threshold of the church,” an intentional apostacy I elucidate below and in Chapter 1. Weil’s spiritual journey to the Church’s margins was deeply informed by her travels among political parties and her exile from France. For me, the intellectual route was reversed, from the threshold of a church I eventually left (a church that for better and for worse left powerful traces on my moral and intellectual formation) to other, more explicitly and recognizably “political” thresholds. If I can claim any “exilic” insight of my own, I do so as an apostate who learned from Weil to relate my own form of uprootedness, such as it is, to political questions raised by the refugees I have known (who, moreover, taught me that “return” and “refuge” are contingent, relative goods).
\end{footnotesize}
When we address them (usually in the third person), they confirm the desirability and fragility of citizenship and stable governance. We observe the weakness of their “human rights” without “political rights” or “the right to have rights.” We may conclude that they are properly objects of charity rather than justice, that they “may well have no right to be successful” in the specifics of their petition. Or we may go further and attempt to restore them to the protections of sovereign power by enacting asylum, arguing for a right of return, or shoring up and reforming national, international, and global orders. Ultimately, and with good reason, we attempt to turn the refugee into a citizen.

But as refugees know too well, citizenship’s protections – however vital – are limited and imperfect at best. Historically speaking, national citizenship falls well short of the guarantee to which it aspires, while a cosmopolitan extension of order threatens to deny not only the right but the possibility of successful flight from dangers that originate within the body politic. We have no reason to believe political order will prove less corruptible at the global level than it has among nations, states, provinces, and cities. If we focus exclusively on turning refugees into citizens, we risk turning would-be refugees into internal exiles. By troubling our discipline, refugees remind us that politics takes place within mutable, transient, and often “adverse times.” Their recurring presence and

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16 For contemporary liberal and/or democratic theorists, the notion of the “sovereign people” puts the citizen in the statesman’s place – in theory.


urgent need call for responses that are less-than-ideal (in Weil’s words, “inadequate – it cannot be otherwise…”)

Theorists who focus on the limitations or shortcomings of the citizenly paradigm have typically looked not to the refugee but to the nomad or the exile. If the citizen is political theory’s central figure, the nomad is its decentralizing figure. The ceaseless motion attributed to the nomad “contests,” “unsets,” and “destabilizes” reified orders, facilitating a fresh look at systems and structures that may have concretized injustice. From this vantage point, “citizenship” can appear irrevocably bound to the histories of exclusion, domination, and conquest that generated modern nation-states. Thus, while the citizenly paradigm often pins down or dismisses refugees without giving adequate attention to the causes and meaning of their flight, nomad theory keeps its imagined migrants permanently on the move so that their flight might teach something to us residential types. So that we may be unsettled, they can never settle. To wake us from intellectual drowsiness, they must neither rest nor return home.

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22 I include here Agamben’s reading of the refugee as a figure that “unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory” and which for that reason should “be regarded as the central figure of our political history.” For Agamben, the “concept of the refugee must be resolutely separated from the concept of ‘human rights’” and recast as a “limit-concept” that “brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed.” By contrast to this heroic reading, I assume that actual refugees (including Arendt in “We Refugees,” which Agamben cites) have good cause to resist “unhinging” behind them a door that offers even a modicum of safety. While they certainly trouble the trinity of state-nation-territory, they accomplish no revolutionary erasure. Instead of assigning to them a world-historical role in fomenting theoretical crises, I propose we take up the more difficult task of thinking
But the “nomad war machine” and the “exilic perspective” give insufficient attention to that which refugees seek: refuge in the forms and practices of citizenship - or at least in the temporary approximation of asylum. Inarguably, nation-states, their armies, and their police produce refugees, but they also provide some degree or quality of refuge to some. A political theory informed by the perspective and experience of the refugee must take both facts into account.

I do not mean to supplant the citizen or the nomad as important figures for political theory. Rather, I propose that the refugee reminds both citizenly and nomadic theorists of certain facts each tends to forget: that real nomads take refuge at temporary homes, and that even the least travelled citizens risk periodic forays from their private refuges into relatively less protected public spaces. These oscillations between shelter and migration, which constitute life and enable political life, come into stark relief in Simone Weil’s political writings. In taking her as my theoretical interlocutor, and reading her as a theorist of refuge, I both acknowledge the vital importance of protected


23 During the Arab Spring in Egypt, one asylum-seeker from the Sudan explained his reluctance to participate: "'Refugees are running from turmoil and unrest. They came here for protection,' said S.H., a Somali refugee who cautiously ventured outside on Sunday to watch the demonstrations from a safe distance. He added sadly, '[Refugees] know what can happen when things get out of control.'" Ashley Bates, "African Refugees in Egypt Sit out the Protests", MotherJones.com http://motherjones.com/mojo/2011/01/african-migrants-egypt-sit-out-protests (accessed January 31 2011).

24 As Deleuze and Guatarri recognize, “a pure nomad does not exist; there is always and already an encampment where it is a matter of stocking—however little—and where it is a matter of inscribing and allocating, of marrying, and of feeding oneself.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus (Continuum, 2004). p. 148.

space and affirm the recurring necessity of departure from or disruption of established orders.

Weil brings to the Western tradition of citizenship and exile her insight as a refugee attending to other refugees. Our canonical refugees tend to propose measures to secure refuge for themselves and others like them, often sacrificing variously invisible others to their projects. Weil, to a much greater degree, situates herself alongside the dissident Marxist, the subject Moroccan, the patriotic General, and the conscripted Vietnamese laborer. Her practice of befriending political strangers, of cross-cutting attention to the Other, tempers the temptations of exile and preserves the urgency and interrogative insight of the refugee’s adverse times. While other exiles seek refuge in a sovereign body with clearly delineated boundaries, Weil envisions a more complex, migratory, endlessly negotiated relationship between agents and their communities. Her sense of shared concern, of the public, only occasionally and contingently corresponds to received, official boundaries.

The theorist of refuge migrates with purpose. She countenances risk in order to move from certain dangers toward relative safety. She alternates between settling and unsettling for the sake of survival and well-being. She recognizes, valorizes, and (when able) contributes to the shelter afforded by the walls and laws of the polis. She understands that shelter enables emergence. She prepares for future migrations in case the shelter she occupies should become (or be found) rather more destructive than

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26 I mean “settling” in both senses: first, as “residence” alternating with migration and, second, as acceptance or resignation alternating with reticence, impatience, and hunger.

nourishing. Seeking shelter for herself and for diverse others, she travels physically and conceptually among plural, intersecting, and conflicting bodies politic (and maybe non- or ante-political), finding in each a source of limited, imperfect, and precious refuge.

**Reading Weil: Orienting Tropes and Interpretive Tactics**

Weil is a challenging interlocutor. Writing in adverse times for diverse audiences, she approaches her subject circuitously, frequently exchanging one term or metaphor for another. Toward a partial synthesis of her essays, I employ a series of orienting tropes I garner from her writings: Threshold, Refuge, and Attention. Each captures an aspect of the politics I elucidate in conversation with Weil. They overlap significantly, but the differences in emphasis and perspective among them provide critical depth of vision.

**Threshold** is Weil’s name for her posture and practice toward a particular institution: the Roman Catholic Church. In my first chapter, I trace the genealogy of that posture, for which she is perhaps most famous, through her engagements with the Communist Party and the French Nation-State. As I develop it from my reading of Weil and her political activities, Threshold names a site of judgment, decision, and action that typically opens onto shelter (primarily in one direction – within - but potentially on both sides). It also describes a corresponding political sensibility, which in calling attention to

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28 There is, however, more pattern than English-speaking readers often encounter in the fragmentary notebooks, letters, and unpublished essays that have – for various reasons – been prioritized for translation and publication. The commonplace problems of poor translation and questionable editorial stewardship apply as well. I focus on the works Weil wrote for publication and in service of the Free French resistance movement. Prioritizing these and arranging them in roughly chronological order, I develop a more coherent reading of Weil and her evolving thought processes.
the foundations, boundaries, and penumbras of a given community can foster attentive relationships across reified divisions.

Threshold draws attention to founding exclusions and violence in communities that nevertheless harbor some good. In chapter 2, I examine Weil’s account of that good in terms of Refuge, a name I choose from the diverse metaphors she employs. Like Threshold, Refuge refers to shelter, but refuge and shelter are not quite synonymous. As a noun, refuge implies shelter for migrants, travelers, and refugees. As a verb, “to refuge,” it invokes the dual activities of seeking and providing shelter. Refuge therefore invokes a reciprocal dynamic between shelter and migration, and it refers us back to the threshold as an epicenter of that dynamic, the border at political community’s core.29

Reading Weil through and between Threshold and Refuge, I elaborate from her writings a “diffuse, nomadic”30 conception political action and community, one that requires actors to exercise judgment in alternating moments of collaboration, engagement, withdrawal, and resistance at multiple sites.31

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31 For the formulation “collaboration, withdrawal, and resistance” I draw on Andre Trocme, a pastor and contemporary of Weil who with his wife Magda coordinated efforts to smuggle some 5,000 Jews out of occupied France. I find his categories helpful to interpret Weil’s political theory, where similar concepts appear in less systematic form. To Trocme’s terms I have added “engagement” the natural opposite to “withdrawal” (an opposition troubled in Weil’s practice). Finally, whereas Trocme describes these categories as more or less mutually exclusive I (through Weil) regard them as mutually dependent, often overlapping phenomena. Andre Trocme, Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).

According to historian Christopher Lloyd, “the overlapping boundaries between resistance and collaboration” during the Occupation, “mean that it was quite possible to move from one activity to the other, or even combine both to a greater or less extent.” He cites several examples: Francois Mitterand (a
In chapter 3, I consider the implications of such a conception for contemporary debates around cosmopolitanism and global governance. Parties to this debate take up a problematic between the importance of established institutions and the importance of thinking and acting beyond given bounds. In doing so, they interrogate the difference between duties to fellow citizens or co-members of the polity and duties to cross-border, nascent, or unrealized communities. In dialogue with several theorists of global justice – Michael Walzer, Martha Nussbaum, and Kwame Anthony Appiah – I suggest that the vocational aspect of Weil’s threshold sensibility, together with her conception of refuge as a pluralistic “enrooting” process, offer crucial tools for navigating the fissures in Westphalia.

The importance of the moral imagination, sympathy, or compassion to debates over boundary-drawing and boundary-policing brings me to the discipline of Attention, a core concept in Weil’s writings. In chapter 4, I take up Attention to Others as a problem that Weil circled continuously without satisfaction. In practice more than in writing, she attempted to move beyond “generous imaginings” toward embodied, habitual practices of care. Unfortunately, Weil’s practice of attention was limited by the circumstances of her exile, her early death, and (most importantly, perhaps) her own blind spots with regard to the discipline necessary for collaborative efforts. By way of furthering Weil’s incomplete experiments in attention, I suggest that “accompaniment” strategies adopted

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Vichy clerk turned Resistance hero), Vichy police Chief Rene Bousquet (first acquitted of treason because he helped certain individuals escape the same persecution he administrated, later charged with crimes against humanity and assassinated), and Maurice Papon (a Vichy administrator convicted of crimes against humanity despite the support of Resistance members he had assisted). Christopher Lloyd, *Collaboration and Resistance in Occupied France* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). pp. ix-x, 117.
by human rights activists in the Americas exemplify and complement her threshold sensibility while pointing to possibilities beyond those imagined by Weil herself. I describe and theorize several projects, including the American Sanctuary Movement’s smuggling of refugees from Central America in the 1980s, volunteer human rights monitoring in Guatemala from the 1990s through today, and the contemporary efforts of No More Deaths to conduct humanitarian patrols along the U.S.-Mexico border. A close examination of these movements, and of their own theoretical constructs, demonstrates how those who practice refuge and attention can sustain collaborative commitment as they challenge the received boundaries of political community.

As this outline makes clear, my engagement with Weil itself represents a migration of sorts, from France in the early 20th century to more recent history in the Americas. Like Weil, I write as a citizen of a powerful, nominally republican regime, which occupies a mostly conquered territory and has long exercised dominion over people to its South. Like Weil, I write as a (sometimes) participant in movements and efforts that call attention to historical conquest, ongoing dominion, and the displacement of persons. Like Weil, I write from within the “atmosphere” of war,32 in a political community so focused on external threats (some real, some exaggerated, some imagined, some ignored or denied) it prefers to overlook, whitewash, or self-forgive its own complicity in these and other violences.

Situating Weil in her political context is necessary for her recuperation as a political thinker. Her theory is practice, engaged in but not wholly bound to her time and

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place. At the same time, I resist readings that take the oft-cited inseparability of her thought from her life as an invitation to reduce her thought to her life. For English-speaking audiences especially, Weil’s health, family relationships, ethnic identity, and early death have been so thoroughly and speculatively deconstructed that her political work and words are often obscured. Looking for specifically political insight, I adopt a threshold sensibility to Weil. Combining close attention with respectful and critical distance, I assume the responsibility to read her well (itself an exercise in the discipline of attention) but resist the tendency to attempt a critique of her personality as a whole.

With regard to textual interpretation, therefore, I have set myself the limited task of reading Weil as a political theorist. I prioritize the works she published, attempted to publish, or circulated within the French Resistance during her lifetime. I regard this partial project (with Appiah, I mean “partial” in both senses) as both prelude and supplement to the already extensive body of scholarship that privileges biography, letters, and notebooks as interpretive keys to her thought as a whole. I will regard my limited task as a success if it sheds light on past treatments and helps Weil the political thinker to take her place alongside the Weil the troubled soul.

Delimiting my interpretive task in this way facilitates attentive, non-appropriative reading of Weil; but more than this it marks the points of departure from which my


reading opens onto political landscapes, institutional thresholds, and potential sites of refuge beyond Weil’s own experience and scope of address. From the threshold with Weil, I turn my attention back to the fractured, porous, contested, policed, and deadly borders that run across and through our own political society. Looking back to returnee settlements in Guatemala and to the Sonoran borderlands, I draw attention to the lacunae and penumbræ of political and legal orders, spaces from which numerous and diverse people emerge in search of refuge.
Chapter One: Weil at the Threshold

On the morning of June 13th, 1940, Simone Weil and her parents left their Paris home to go shopping. They soon discovered the government had posted placards in the street declaring Paris an “open city”: invading forces would encounter no military resistance. In that moment the Weils became refugees. They went straight to the train station without stopping home for luggage.

Simone spent the next several years in exile from her Paris home: from Marseilles to Casablanca, New York City, and finally London, where she joined de Gaulle’s Free French movement. She would never return to France. In August of 1943, at the age of 34, and one year before the Allies reached Paris, she died of complications related to tuberculosis.

For some commentators, Weil typifies the detached, uprooted intellectual who learns only too late the importance of country. Before the war, she had been an ardent anti-colonialist and a severe critic of the very idea of the nation. In joining de Gaulle, she is supposed to have seen reason and resigned herself to the patriotic project of national defense. However, closer examination of Weil’s later writings reveals that she maintained a difficult and complex relationship to the French nation-state, troubling the patriot’s equation between participation and identity. Moreover, as the hoped-for liberation drew nearer, Weil resigned from de Gaulle’s organization (renamed the “Fighting French”), citing the General’s political ambitions, the transformation of his movement into a government-in-exile, and her own vocation as a theorist.
For subsequent readers, Weil’s participation in and resignation from the Resistance has been largely overshadowed by her critical engagements with two other institutions: the Roman Catholic Church and the Communist Party. For her part, Weil regards the Party, the Church, and the Nation-State as a trio of similarly powerful and similarly dangerous entities. Thus she writes of “patriotism for the Church” and compares Party orthodoxy to ecclesiastical anathematizing. When she adopts a position “on the threshold of the Church,” she describes a mode of engagement she has long rehearsed in the political arenas of partisanship and patriotism.

To the more conventional parishioners, partisans and patriots she encountered, however, Weil could seem a cynic or purist at worst, an individualistic gadfly at best. For political theorists, her hesitation toward “collectivities” suggests an apolitical tendency. Most readers are disturbed by her resistance to ascriptive identities. She is commonly presented as a troubled soul, a puritanical perfectionist who simply had trouble joining or accepting community.

However, to emphasize that Weil rejected party membership, refused baptism, and resigned from the Resistance risks overlooking her intense, dedicated participation in

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2 See Leslie J. Fiedler, "Simone Weil, a Prophet out of Israel," Commentary 11 (1951). See also T.S. Eliot’s mixed praise in the Preface to The Need for Roots.

3 See, for example, Mary G. Dietz, Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil (Rowman and Littlefield, 1988).

4 In particular, see Robert Coles, Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage, ed. Merloyd Lawrence, Radcliffe Biography Series (Addison-Wesley, 1987). See also Nevin.
these and other communities. In the Party, the Church, and the Nation-state, Weil encountered social and political bodies (“collectivities” in her terminology) she considered at once deeply problematic and in possession of crucial goods. That she either left or did not join institutions or communities she found straightforwardly dangerous or merely repellent would be unremarkable. What makes her approach instructive is the way she parses participation from identity and engagement from idealization.

I suggest that Weil engaged not in spite of her critical sensibilities but in and through them. Her example illuminates how a limited and discerning critical distance, one with an adequately critical sense of itself, constitutes a particular (and particularly valuable) mode of engagement. Not the degree or intensity but the quality and character of engagement are at issue. From her position at the threshold, Weil troubles and reworks the very terms of engagement, thus reimagining the communities with which she is engaged.

Weil’s threshold sensibility is complex, at once a product and a modifier of the conditions under which she learned and practiced it. It is knowingly partial and imperfect. It calls for judgment and negotiation. Consequently, a too abstract treatment risks serious misreading. In the following chapter, I offer a genealogy of Weil’s threshold sensibility through a close examination of her political life: of her vocation, limitations, and charisma as an individual who – episodically and eccentrically - contributed to action in concert under deeply adverse conditions.
Threshold Partisanship

In 1931, Simone Weil arrived in the town of Le Puy for her first teaching assignment. Formally trained as a philosophy teacher at the Ecole Normale, her Left-revolutionary politics had not endeared her to the educational authorities. They had sent her to Le Puy to isolate her from trade-union militancy in France’s more industrial sectors. Undeterred, Weil sought out what contacts she could find in local labor organizations. She also joined a teachers’ union\(^5\) affiliated with the C.G.T., a syndicalist federation and major rival to the Communist Party-aligned C.G.T.U.\(^6\)

Although she chose sides, Weil regarded unity as essential to the “viability of the working class as a revolutionary force.” While the national leadership of both federations resisted unity as a threat to each’s institutional principles, Weil attempted to foster a conversation among “all the working-class elements in (Le Puy), without distinction, including the Communists.” She introduced local leaders of different factions to one another and organized a meeting at which the attendees agreed to create an inter-union group that would support any existing union regardless of affiliation. They also agreed not to pressure newly-formed unions, leaving them to decide their affiliation for

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\(^5\) As Petrement notes, this union was meant for teachers of younger children, not for “professors” like Weil, who taught philosophy in the equivalent of high school. She had to bend the rules a bit to join. Pétrement. p. 79.

\(^6\) Since the 19th century, the French trade-union movement had incorporated Proudhonist individualism and anarchism. The 1895 founding of the syndicalist Confederation Generale du Travail (C.G.T.) created a national union movement relatively independent from Communist or Socialist parties. However, in 1921 disaffected C.G.T. members who desired a closer relationship to the Communist Party formed the Confederation Generale du Travaille Unitaire (C.G.T.U.), allying themselves with the Third International and creating a national rift between labor factions. Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism*, ed. Michael W. Apple, Critical Social Thought (New York/London: Routledge, 1989). pp. 79-83
themselves. With this bottom-up strategy, Weil sought to balance “respect (for) the existing trade union organizations, which are the most precious conquest of the working-class movement,” with the need to “realize unity without the support of these organizations or even, in many instances, in spite of them.”

As liaison between unions, Weil modeled a role for intellectuals that might limit ideological and intellectual leadership over the labor movement. She related this principle to her preference for trade-unions over political parties. A political party, she held, unites its members around commonly held opinions, or ideology, while a union directly references the productive activities of its members as the common link among them. Because parties emphasize opinions and ideas they tend by their very nature to enhance the “domination of those who know how to handle words over those who know how to handle things,” her take on Marx’s suspicion of ideology. She followed Rosa Luxemburg in criticizing Lenin’s decision to substitute a “vanguard” party of ideologically-tested and educated bureaucrats for the direct, participatory leadership of the proletariat through the soviets. Trade-unions, she felt, would be generally less tempted than parties to bureaucratic deformations of this sort.

Still, Weil knew from experience that the situation on the ground complicated her account of parties and unions. Firstly, insofar as trade-union leadership could (and did)

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8 Ibid. pp. 76-77.
9 See “Prospects” and Weil’s book review of Lenin in Weil, Oppression and Liberty. pp. 21, 34-35. In her Marxist phase, Weil was essentially anti-Leninist and neo-Spartacist.
10 Pétrement. p. 88. See also p. 177 where she is accused of intellectual leadership of workers.
also entrench the power of bureaucrats or ideologues over workers, unions were subject
to the same criticisms she directed at political parties, if not to the same degree.
Moreover, different unions took different stances on the role of political parties in their
work. Although she attempted “to distinguish among those (efforts) that are conducted in
such a way as to strengthen the ascendancy of the intellectuals over the workers, and
those constructed in such a way as to free the workers from this domination,”\(^\text{11}\) her
general preference for trade-unions over parties had to be negotiable.

Weil eventually joined both of the national teachers’ federations, one affiliated
with the C.G.T. and the other with the C.G.T.U., allowing her to decide when she arrived
at a new school which local organization to join depending on its level of activity and the
dominant factions within it. Throughout her labor activism, Weil regularly attended
meetings and maintained dialogue with both camps. She did impose some limits on her
flexibility. In particular, despite her close associations with individual Communists, her
revolutionary aims, and her eventual membership in the C.G.T.U.-affiliated federation,
she consistently challenged the Party loyalties of Stalinists and dissidents alike.\(^\text{12}\)

In the summer of 1932, Weil traveled to Germany to investigate the role of the
Communist Party in the volatile political situation there. Her trip was occasioned by
Leon Trotsky’s “What Next?,” which called for a United Front of Communists and Social
Democrats against Nazism – and stipulated conditions for such an alliance. Weil felt that
Trotsky’s “superstitious” attachment to the Communist Party hampered his analysis.

\(^{11}\) Ibid. p. 87.

\(^{12}\) Ibid. pp. 48, 119-120, 125-126, 137, 161.
Determined to see firsthand the conditions of the working class and the relative strengths of the different political parties in Germany, she toured the country in the company of local trade-union militants and Communist Party members.\textsuperscript{13}

On the basis of her observations, Weil challenged Trotsky point by point in a series of articles on “The Situation in Germany.”\textsuperscript{14} Trotsky had cast the proposed United Front as a vehicle for Communist supremacy after Hitler’s defeat. Toward that end, he argued the Party should retain complete operational independence within any alliance with other Left parties.\textsuperscript{15} In Weil’s view, this partisan reservation endangered the United Front. A merely opportunistic alliance with eventual Communist dominance as its avowed goal would not be strong enough to confront Hitler and the National Socialists. Instead, she called for concrete, programmatic compromises between the Communist Party and the Social Democrats. Echoing her earlier effort to secure cooperation between rival unions in Le Puy, she suggested that the Communists should signal goodwill to Social Democrats by ceasing to recruit from the larger, reformist unions into their own “red unions.” Furthermore, while Trotsky insisted that the Communist Party must preserve “unabridged freedom of criticism of temporary allies,” Weil suggested that the Party, without ceasing to criticize, should “moderate the tone of its criticisms, and give up a violence (of tone) that is perhaps legitimate but is really harmful” to the immediate

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p. 130.

\textsuperscript{14} Published over several months and titled “The Situation in Germany.” Collected in Simone Weil, \textit{Formative Writings, 1929-1941}, trans., Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

goals of a United Front.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, while Trotsky denied that the interests of any class, nation, or individual could be distinct from or more important than those of the Party,\textsuperscript{17} Weil challenged the Party to cease privileging its self-assigned historical role over the urgent threat of Nazism.\textsuperscript{18}

Even if she could convince Trotsky and his followers, however, Weil saw there would be no United Front as long as the German Party deferred to Moscow’s direction, particularly to its false equivalence between the moderate Left and Nazism itself.

Trotsky had also been a harsh critic of Stalin’s leadership (for which he had been exiled), but Weil identified deeper problems at work than a Stalinist deformation of Marxist doctrine. A mere change of leadership in the Soviet Union began to appear to her both impossible and insufficient to address the conflict between its interests as a state and its hypothetical position as representative of the global proletariat. She pointed out that even dissenting Communists, in particular Trotsky and his followers, “show a perpetual desire to be loyal to the ‘worker’s state’ and the ‘Party of the working class’ that often impairs their clarity of judgment.” Loyalty to the Soviet State had prevented Trotsky from seeing that “(t)he Russian state apparatus, like every state apparatus in the world, deports, exiles, and directly or indirectly kills those who try to diminish its power.”\textsuperscript{19} For the sake of his

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Weil will remain concerned with tone until her work for the French Resistance. See: Weil, "The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government." Contrast Luxemburg’s claim that “tone” is irrelevant in “Militia and Militarism,” Rosa Luxemburg, \textit{Selected Political Writings} (Monthly Review Press, 1971).
\item \textsuperscript{17} Trotsky. pp. 41-42.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Weil, \textit{Formative Writings, 1929-1941.} pp. 123-124, 190-191.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 140-143.
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partisan attachment he had claimed that “the inner forces of the German proletariat are inexhaustible,” attributing limitless energy to class actors so that he could set strategic limits to Party collaboration in the United Front. Additionally, he required this optimistic view of others, calling for “pessimists” like Weil to be “driven out of the proletarian ranks as if they were stricken with the plague.”

While Trotsky had rhetorically exiled “pessimists” from the working class movement, Weil turned her attention to revolutionaries facing a double exile from Germany and the USSR. Two days after the final installment of “Situation” appeared, the Reichstag fire ushered in Hitler’s rule. The USSR closed its borders to German Communist refugees, thereby choosing diplomatic relations with its neighboring state over the welfare of members of the global proletariat it claimed to represent. This was the last straw for Weil, who began to argue not only that the USSR no longer represented a workers’ state but that a true workers’ state, with perfect coincidence between the interests of governing bureaucrats and those of governed workers, could not exist.

In “Prospects: Are We Heading for the Proletarian Revolution?” Weil sets out to demonstrate that the defeat of the German proletariat should not come as such a surprise

20 Trotsky. p. 189.

Trotsky’s hyperbolic criticism of pessimists could of course be attributed to his desire to motivate action, but from Weil’s perspective such optimistic propaganda had already robbed the German Communist Party of whatever moral authority it might have once enjoyed with the working classes. By claiming false successes and exaggerating its own influence, the party had “failed in its most elementary duty, which is to inform the workers and give them a clear idea of the relation of forces.” For her, the Communist Party’s loss of credibility contributed greatly to its relative weakness as a force against Hitler. Weil, *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*. p. 131

21 Pétrement. pp. 139, 143, 165, 172.

22 Collected in Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*. 

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to labor militants, for it had precedent in the defeat of the Russian proletarian soviets by the Soviet Union’s own state apparatus. “The Russian Revolution has not been crushed…and yet nowhere on the surface of the globe – including Russia – are there any soviets.” The freedom expected from a workers’ state never materialized: the soviets were reduced to administrative apparatuses rather than participatory forums while the people were disarmed and held in check by a standing army. A professional party bureaucracy belied Lenin’s promise that “every cook would learn how to rule the state.” The political regime in the U.S.S.R. was, Weil concludes, “more or less the same in structure” as that in Nazi Germany.²³

Her arguments were not well received in the Leftist circles she addressed. After the publication of “Situation,” a Trotskyite delegation attempted to exclude Weil from the annual trade-union Conference for Unification. Unable to secure the necessary votes, the Trotskyites themselves withdrew from the meeting.²⁴ Weil encountered more hostility when, after the publication of “Prospects,” she attended the national meeting of the CGTU where the Stalinist faction heckled, interrupted, and assaulted her and her fellows to prevent them from speaking or distributing literature. At a meeting of the United Federation of Teachers, she rose to speak on the USSR’s denial of asylum to German

²³ Ibid. pp. 3-4, 6-7.

²⁴ Following the failure of this unity meeting, Weil was asked by likeminded comrades to draft a statement they could sign explaining their position on the Soviet Union. Weil produced a declaration that, in effect, called for the founding a Fourth International – a position Trotsky himself would adopt some months later. Pétrement. pp. 157-8.
Communist refugees. She was shouted down by Stalinists who climbed onto the stage and threatened her.\textsuperscript{25}

Meanwhile, Weil regularly defended members of the very factions that were trying to expel her. After the Reichstag fire she began sheltering German refugees at her family’s house, helping them find jobs and avoid extradition. She focused her rescue efforts on Trotskyites, dissident Social Democrats, and others who lacked even the limited support of party networks.\textsuperscript{26} In print, she spoke out against the USSR’s expulsion and intimidation of Trotsky and other dissidents\textsuperscript{27} and defended a Stalinist teacher who had been fired by the French Ministry of Education for his political views.\textsuperscript{28} That Trotskyites and Stalinists alike answered her efforts by attempting to expel or silence her only confirmed Weil’s complaint about their ideological blinders. In a review of Lenin’s \textit{Materialism and Empiro-Criticism}, she argued that the book employed

\begin{quote}
a method which consists in thinking with the object of refuting, the solution being already given before the research. And by what, then, could this solution be given? By the Party, just as it is given for the Catholic by the Catholic Church…Such a method of thought is not that of a free man…The stifling Regime which weighs at present upon the Russian people was already implied in embryo in Lenin’s attitude toward his own process of thought.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{25} Ibid. pp. 172, 179-180.
\bibitem{26} Ibid. pp. 153-153.
\bibitem{27} Weil, \textit{Formative Writings, 1929-1941}. pp. 142-143.
\bibitem{28} Pétrement. p. 167.
\bibitem{29} Weil, \textit{Oppression and Liberty}. p. 29. See also her argument in “Situation” about the Party’s failure in Germany: “(S)uppressing all freedom of expression within the Party…kills off all decisiveness and initiative and prevents any real education of the newcomers by the experienced militants.” Weil, \textit{Formative Writings, 1929-1941}. p. 139.
\end{thebibliography}
In the end, Weil rejected the centerpiece of Communist orthodoxy from Marx and Engels to Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg: the inevitable development of a workers’ state – even the mere possibility of such a state.

So she changed tactics. Her first book-length treatise, *Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression*, argues that the development of an organization powerful and efficient enough to carry out a political revolution will lead after the revolution, almost by necessity, to the creation of a repressive bureaucracy that recapitulates all the old problems of domination that characterized the former regime. Revolution cannot eliminate “the existence of organs of government that are permanent and distinct from the population.” Better then to set one’s sights lower, attempting to “introduce a little play into the cogs of the machine that is grinding us down…; (to) encourage whatever is capable in the spheres of politics, economics, or technique, of leaving the individual here and there a certain freedom of movement amid the trammels cast around him by the social organization.” In other words, she would focus her efforts on finding and widening small gaps in the barriers to human freedom and well-being.

In pursuit of this goal, Weil took a leave of absence from her teaching duties and spent a year working as a factory employee. Although tinged with romanticism for

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30 Written in 1934 and collected in Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*. Weil continually sought but never found a publisher. It is among her most widely-read books today, particularly by those interested in Weil’s engagement with Marxism.


32 Ibid. p. 114.
working people, this decision followed directly from her philosophical dissatisfaction with Marxism. Weil complained to a friend that, of the great Bolshevik leaders, “doubtless none of them – certainly not Trotsky, and I don’t think Lenin either – had ever set foot inside a factory, so that they hadn’t the faintest idea of the real conditions which make servitude or freedom for the workers…” These conditions she set out to determine.

Over twelve months from 1934-1935 she worked at three different factories, attempting to live on only what she could earn. Especially at the beginning, she had to take frequent unpaid leave for medical treatment since she was unaccustomed to the work, a problem exacerbated by a presumed birth defect in her hands and a susceptibility to intense migraine headaches. Her factory journals are dominated by reflections on the effect of unskilled work under brutal and uncertain conditions on the workers’ capacity for analytical thought and fellow-feeling. Beyond confirming her observation in Germany that truly desperate poverty tends to stifle rather than foster revolutionary impulses, this period of experiential study produced more questions than answers for


Weil. She continued throughout her life to write on the conditions under which physical labor could encourage rather than hamper political freedom.  

As Weil moved from revolutionary goals toward freedom of thought and action, her former comrades began to accuse her of reactionary and anti-political tendencies. Trotsky held that Weil’s disillusionment with the Soviet Union had left her to find “consolation in a new mission: to defend her personality against society. A formula of the old liberalism, refurbished by a cheaply bought anarchist exultation.” In “Prospects,” Weil had anticipated such criticism:  

These views will no doubt be taxed with defeatism…it is doubtful, however, whether we gain anything by using in our ranks the vocabulary of the (Soviet) general staff. The only question that arises is whether we should or should not continue the struggle; if the former, then we shall struggle with as much enthusiasm as if victory were assured….And we are not really without hope. The mere fact that we exist, that we conceive and want something different from what exists constitutes for us a reason for hoping.

Giving up on the historical inevitability of large-scale revolution may have looked to Trotsky like the abandonment of hope itself. For Weil, letting go of the few Marxist orthodoxies to which she had subscribed freed her to find hope in the tenacious imaginations of diverse co-laborers.

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37 Quoted in Pétrement. p. 178.

38 Weil suggests that optimism is both promoted and enforced by the Soviet leadership, and that to upbraid one another for pessimism is only to do Stalin’s work for him.

Trotsky, meanwhile, continued to deny the worth of diverse critical perspectives, claiming he did not need “the discoveries of Urbahns, Laurat, Souvarine, Simone Weil, and others (to see) that bureaucratism…corrodes the moral texture of Soviet Society.” Despite his protestations, it does seem that Weil and her circle influenced him. After the Trotskyites had tried to exclude Weil and other dissenters from the national Conference for Unification, the dissenting group tasked Weil with drafting a declaration in its name. That document called for syndicalists to leave the Third International and create a new revolutionary organization. Only months later, Trotsky himself gave up on reforming the Third International and began to lay the groundwork for the Fourth.

In fact, Trotsky founded the Fourth International at Weil’s house. By December of 1933, he had long been in exile from the USSR. The terms of his asylum in France dictated that he not participate in political meetings. As part of her perpetual, even habitual campaign against restrictions on political freedom, whether in France or the USSR, Weil offered her family’s home for a secret gathering. A disguised Trotsky soon arrived with his family and armed bodyguards to spend several nights. Between meetings Weil kept him busy in lively debate – so much so that Trotsky wondered why, if she disagreed with him so strongly, she had agreed to host him at all, an absurdity according to his principles but a characteristic practice for Weil.

Upon his departure, Trotsky told the family, “You will be able to say that it is in your house that the Fourth International was founded,” a modest attribution of credit to his bourgeois hosts. Ironically, Weil would probably not have seen this outcome as

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40 Quoted in Pétrement. p. 178.
particularly strong evidence of her success as a political actor. In their late-night conversation, Trotsky had defended the Russian Revolution’s shortcomings on the grounds that it had at least produced the Trotskyite opposition to Stalin, which might yet complete the work of the Revolution. Weil regarded this as small compensation for the Soviet Union’s crimes. While Trotsky still measured success in world-historical terms, and considered faith in the workers’ state a precondition for political life, Weil’s political yardstick had shifted to a different scale. She now focused on helping the dispossessed and displaced secure shelter for their physical lives and space for political life. That her critical and material contributions nevertheless furthered Trotsky’s work indicates a unique mode of participation in political affairs, one embracing tensions between engagement and withdrawal, collaboration and resistance, agreement and aid. She would continue to rehearse such balancing acts for the rest of her life.41

Toward the Nation: a Cautious Approach

As a dissident revolutionary, Weil had approached the nation-state via intra-Marxist debates. She sided with Luxemburg and Liebknecht over Lenin on the question of national defense,42 arguing (in a paraphrase of Liebknecht) that “no matter what name

41 Ibid. pp. 188-190. From Weil’s notes, Petrement concludes they argued mostly about the USSR’s status as a workers’ state. One note in particular touches on the question of legitimacy of authority, to which Weil would return years later in her work for the Free French. She had marshaled against Trotsky’s apologies for the USSR a long list of examples of oppression and exploitation of the working class in Russia. According to her notes, Trotsky replied that the “Russian worker controls the government to the extent that he tolerates it, because he prefers this government to the return of the capitalists.” Weil records a brief, fragmentary response: “but the workers also tolerate…,” implying the obvious counterargument: that by such a standard, every government in existence can claim legitimacy to the degree that its people merely tolerate it, especially if we take toleration alone as a sign of what the population “prefers.” This exchange illuminates the later importance for Weil of a “receiving organization” to mediate between the not-yet people and General de Gaulle, the not-yet legislator.
it bears – fascism, democracy, or dictatorship of the proletariat – the principle enemy remains the administrative, police, and military apparatus; not the apparatus across the border from us … but the one that calls itself our defender and makes us its slaves.”

From this neo-Spartacist perspective, international war could only strengthen oppressive state organs. It should therefore be avoided at all costs.

When she abandoned revolutionary aims and began to consider the nation independently of Marxist paradigms, Weil learned to think more subtly about relationships among nation-states and political actors. Nevertheless, I mention her early, inflexible position because the impetus behind it – a radical suspicion of state and military oppression - left enduring (and ultimately, I would argue, beneficial) traces on her later thought. The anti-militarist impulse, when tempered and chastened by anti-colonialism, gave her a unique voice within the ranks of the French Resistance, where she resisted nostalgia for “Eternal France” and drew on the memories of conquered provinces, the aspirations of colonial subjects, and the mixed legacies of 1789 to re-imagine France as a limited, imperfect, precious refuge for diverse peoples. Weil’s conversion from anti-war militant to volunteer for General Gaulle is therefore the story of a gradually relaxed and flexing but never abandoned resistance to the power and pull of the nation-state.

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42 Lenin opposed all “imperial” wars but excepted wars of revolution and national defense. Luxemburg regarded Lenin’s use of the Red Army as a threat to the Revolution. She allowed for only domestic insurrection.


44 The standard portrayal of Weil as a fickle, inconsistent and finally repentant “pacifist” obscures the trajectory of her intellectual development, from knee-jerk, unreflective anti-statism to a threshold position characterized by cautious, critical, collaborative engagement with a nation-state whose pull she never
The Spanish Civil War provided the first occasion for Weil to rework her approach to the nation-state. In 1936, Left-coalition governments had won close elections in both Spain and France. In Spain, an attempted coup de tat pitted the militarist “Nationalists” (monarchists, traditionalists, and fascists) against the parliamentarist “Republicans” (liberals, socialists, communists, and anarchists). Fearful of drawing other powers into the conflict, and of domestic threats to its own narrowly elected coalition, the French government remained neutral.\footnote{45} Weil defended neutrality to the government’s Marxist critics, but she also decided to cross the border and take up arms herself (a novel interpretation of Liebknecht’s anti-militarist maxim).\footnote{46} Using journalist’s credentials she joined an anarchist commando unit and became one of the first international volunteers in the Republican forces. For several weeks she patrolled with her unit and endured aerial bombardment, but burn injuries from a cooking fire accident forced her from the front before she saw direct combat. Spared from the worst of the war, she continued to follow the increasingly tragic accounts from the front.

Weil’s activity in Spain highlights several interesting tensions beyond the oft-noted but superficial irony of an anti-war radical carrying a gun. As a Republican militia member, Weil resisted one “state apparatus,” the mutinous military, in defense of ceased to resist. See Fiedler and Coles. Also, see the Introduction to Simone Weil, Simone Weil on Colonialism, ed. J. P. Little (Lanham/Boulder/New York/Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). p. 5.

\footnote{45} Within France, the anti-parliamentarist riots of February 6, 1934 were a recent memory.

\footnote{46} Weil continued to distinguish international war from domestic insurrection, opposing those Marxists who still sought to use the war in Spain as pretext for an international military struggle against fascism: “What is at stake here? Proving to yourself that you’re not a coward? Comrades, they’re recruiting for Spain. You’re free to go. They’ll certainly find you some rifles there… You may meet some pacifists who are still pacifists, rifles in hand…” Weil, Formative Writings, 1929-1941. p. 258.
another, the elected government. On the other hand, the Republican forces (and the anarchist militia in particular) attracted Weil precisely because they were *not* directed by the government. She judged them (at first) a popular movement with independent militias democratically organized. This preference for non-state entities, even in defense of a national or political order, would later inform her work with and eventual resignation from the Free French. On the other hand, the abuse and atrocity carried out by both sides over the duration of the war (accounts of which began to reach Weil before she had left the hospital) led her to take more seriously the vital implications of national order’s relative stability *and* vulnerability.

Weil works through these tensions in “*Guerre de Troie*” or “The Power of Words,” (1936 - hereafter “*Guerre*”) where she draws lessons from Spain for the brewing Franco-German conflict over colonial Morocco. Although critical of the conduct on both sides of the civil war, she still considers “essential” the “eternal struggle of those who obey against those who command.” However, she also defends the

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48 See the “Letter to Bernanos” on the “atmosphere” war. Two events described in that letter – commander Durruti’s execution of a boy who refused to join the militia, and the near-execution of a priest (Weil was personally present for the latter) – are models for the image in “The Poem of Force” of “a man…disarmed and naked with a weapon pointing at him” who “becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him…” Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. p. 165. Weil compared her own failure to oppose the priest’s execution (even though it did not ultimately take place) to Peter’s denial of Jesus, drawing from both examples the conclusion that the “energy” behind internal resolve can deprive an actor of the “grace” required to go through with difficult action. Weil, *The Need for Roots*. pp. 180-181.

49 Collected in Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. The essay’s full title is *Ne recommencos pas le guerre de Troie*, “Do not Restart the Trojan War.” The English translation has been given the title “The Power of Words.” The original title references Jean Giraudoux’s play, “The Trojan War will not Take Place,” itself known in English as “Tiger at the Gates.” Preserving the title’s reference to the Trojan War also relates this essay to Weil’s later, better-known *Iliad* essay, “The Poem of Force.”
“resistance of those at the top,” which, despite its obvious motive in particular class interests, takes up a “duty to defend order, without which no social life can survive.” Lest this be read as a conservative turn in the face of the horrors of civil war, Weil insists that “those at the top” remain “inclined, whether they know it or not, to trample on the human dignity of those below them” by virtue of their position. But when those below can offer sufficient resistance to this tendency, the result is a “tension between pressure from below and resistance from above (that) creates and maintains an unstable equilibrium, which defines at each moment the structure of society.”

Unlike reified, “stable social hierarchy,” an unstable social structure enables “social progress,” “the actual establishment of new social relationships,” and political action itself. (229)

Weil admits that “tension” and “struggle” within an unstable equilibrium of progressive order “may under certain circumstances turn into a war.” But she rejects the view that it will “inevitably become so.” Order, as Weil conceives it here, is inseparable from risk. The challenge for those who take up the “duty to defend” that order is, in her view, to “diminish the risks of war, without interfering with the struggle between forces which…is the condition of life itself.” Entrenched in the mistaken belief that struggle is war, the Spanish forces behind the coup chose war over struggle, proclaiming their “duty to defend order” but abdicating it in practice.

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50 Following Machiavelli, she mentions the “vigorous and concerted action of the Roman plebians, and also the occupation of factories by French workers as examples of non-mediated political struggle that avoid the State of War. Ibid. pp. 229-230.


52 Ibid. pp. 229, 236, 238.
Weil contrasts her conception of “order” and its defense to “(w)hat is called national security … an imaginary state of affairs in which one would retain the capacity to make war while depriving all other countries of it.” Such unrealistic “realism” seeks not to limit but to eliminate the risks of war, rendering its own military mobilization unlimited in the process. “So-called national defense” therefore extends well beyond national lives and lands to include the protection and the acquisition of colonial holdings, international prestige, uninterrupted supplies of goods, and any other potential or imaginable factors enhancing the nation’s ability to wage war. Thus the French public in the 1930s has come to accept that obtaining or maintaining a colonial foothold in Morocco counts as “defense” simply because it offers a supply of bodies and raw materials. Finally, unlimited defense becomes indistinguishable from unlimited offense so that “(i)t is nearly always believed…by all parties that the only defense is attack”. The cliché equivalence between defense and attack both begs the question in particular cases and adopts conceptual confusion as common sense. A “precise analysis” distinguishing defense from attack could therefore “be a way of saving human lives.”

However, the greatest difficulty in recuperating defense is the conception of nation to which it usually refers. Willing to recuperate “order” and “defense,” Weil is much more ambivalent about the “nation,” suggesting at first that “the very concept of the nation … needs to be suppressed” but then amending: “or rather, the manner in which

53 “What a country calls its vital economic interests are not the things which enable its citizens to live, but the things which enable it make war; petrol is much more likely than wheat to be a cause of international conflict.” Ibid. p. 224.

54 Ibid. pp. 222-225, 236.
the word is used.” As used, she regards nation as one of a “swarm of vacuous entities or abstractions (that) prevent us from seeing that there is a problem to be solved instead of a fatality to be endured.” Whether it can be used differently remains, for now, an open question.

For Weil, “nation” is a “vacuous” abstraction when elevated to the status of an abstract ideal, as is typically the case. When a name corresponding to an “actual human group” is stripped of every trait but its name – “France,” “Germany,” or simply “the Nation” - it becomes a floating signifier, easily mobilized to justify limitless aggression against its supposed opposites. Weil illustrates the phenomenon by citing other examples of vacuous abstraction, including the “murderous opposition between fascism and communism” in which the conflicting parties mirror one another’s willingness to submit to the very things they ostensibly oppose: “The anti-fascist position is this: anything rather than fascism; anything, including fascism, so long as it is labeled communism,” and the anti-communist position merely switches the labels. Even “the distinction between dictatorship and democracy,” although it refers to “a real opposition” between political modes, “loses its meaning if we see each of the two terms as a thing-in-itself (rather than) as a point of reference for judging the character of a social structure.” When used as points of reference, abstract concepts like “democracy and dictatorship” or “order” and “defense” take form in application to particular cases. By contrast, when

55 Ibid. p. 225.

56 Taking Weil’s insistence on thinking in terms of “to the extent that” and “insofar as,” it would be fair to say the nation is a “vacuous abstraction” to the extent that we erase its particulars. Thus, triumphal accounts of history that ignore sins and laud virtues render the nation “vacuous” insofar as they ignore its particulars. The more thorough the erasure of history, the more vacuous the nation…
deployed as “vacuous” abstractions from actually existing groups, the action is reversed, particulars are stripped, and mere invocation of the name substitutes for careful judgment. “France” is more a self-referential standard than a name\(^{57}\) (Weil predicts it will “submit to a totalitarian regime” in the name of defending itself from Germany’s totalitarian regime),\(^{58}\) while the claim that “democracy” exists poses a barrier to further attempts to accomplish, realize, or extend democratic practice.\(^{59}\) As a result, words like “nation” often “stupefy the mind,” conjure “unreal conflicts,” and “obscure real conflicts.” Instead of facilitating judgment, they stifle it.

“Stupefied” by the idealized nation and its partisans, Weil cannot draw nearer to it without serious and prolonged examination and critical analysis. Despite her hesitant suggestion that we reconsider “the manner in which the word is used”, she as yet sees “no content” in it beyond the typical consequences of nationalist propaganda: “corpses, and orphans, and disabled men, and tears and despair.” Not the messy, complicated particulars gathered and approximated under the heading “France” but the idealized abstractions, “the Nation” or “Eternal France”, give Weil pause. She has encountered no alternative model. It will take creative, imaginative, recuperative work to see what

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\(^{57}\) Recent, public defenses of “American exceptionalism” in the U.S. amount to just this: that “America” provides its own standard for its conduct. “America” is an exception to every rule because no standard other than “Americanness” applies, and no judgment is harsher than the accusation that some person or thing is “un-American.”

\(^{58}\) Or even, as under Vichy, surrender to Germany in the name of keeping France alive.

“content” potentially inheres in the French nation, and thereby to determine the terms of her engagement with it.

Ironically, it was not France’s weakness vis-à-vis Germany but the colonial pivots of their conflict that helped Weil reinterpret the defense of France apart from “vacuous abstractions” of national pride. A staunch anti-colonialist, Weil found herself in a very small minority of the French citizenry. Her anti-colonial essays, which drew on readily available newspaper accounts of corruption, political imprisonment, police brutality, and coerced labor in the colonies, mostly fell on deaf ears. When the French government responded to bombings and assassinations in Indochina by proclaiming, “None of that can cast doubt on the loyalty of the Indochinese people, their unshakeable attachment to the nation that protects them,” its absurd denial of the facts reinforced Weil’s complaint about “vacuous” appeals to the nation.60 She came to regard the French people as so “convinced of their own generosity” as to be wholly unreceptive to information challenging the national self-conception.61

However, as France’s position vis-à-vis Germany weakened, Weil perceived a potential confluence between anticolonial priorities and national self-interest. In “New Facts about the Colonial Problem in the French Empire” (1938) she abandons appeals to conscience and sets out to justify decolonization on national security grounds. Noting that France lacks the military power to defend all of its colonial holdings, and pointing to


61 Ibid. pp. 67-68, 71.
evidence that many colonial subjects would side with the Axis powers against their current masters, she argues for turning colonial subjects into citizen stakeholders:

It is indispensable that French subjects have something of their own that they would be likely to lose under another rule; and to that effect it is indispensable that they cease being subjects, in other words passive beings… They must start the process, soon and quite rapidly, of evolution from the status of subject to that of citizen.62

Beyond the tactical shift on the colonial question,63 “New Facts” represents a major development in Weil’s approach to the nation-state. In calling for citizenship rights for colonial subjects, Weil acknowledges the nation-state as more than that which “calls itself our defender and makes us its slaves.” But crucially, she does so precisely where that description is most applicable: to the colonial situation. Although nation-states frequently violate the protections of citizenship (leading to “corpses, orphans, and despair”) true “enslavement” renders its subjects barely capable of resisting. Massacres of demonstrating or striking citizens in a polity like France (or indeed the U.S.) are historically familiar but rather more of an exception than are massacres of revolting

62 Ibid. p. 70. There is, of course, another method by which colonial subjects could cease being “passive” beings: they could take up arms and revolt, engaged in widespread civil disobedience, or otherwise wrest independence from their colonial masters. Weil argues against pursuing colonial independence through armed revolution or revolt. Besides the practical difficulties of France’s overwhelming military and technological superiority and the risk of the colonies falling prey to Germany, Japan, or some other power after ousting the French, she rejects this alternative for the same reasons she decided against proletarian revolution within Europe: the risk of creating an oppressive regime in the revolution’s wake (connected to her fear of postcolonial nationalisms). Moreover, “New Facts” is a political as much as a description of theoretical ideals: it presents an anti-colonial argument to the colonial power.

63 The irony of New Facts: it purports to abandon sympathy in favor of security, all the while bemoaning the poverty of national imagination that makes this move necessary. It strongly implies that getting France to reconceive national security in the manner suggested would accomplish the penetration of “new facts” and make the national imagination more pliable, more able to exercise sympathetic imaginings…
colonial workers (as in Tunisia in Weil’s time) or of rebellious slaves. The relative frequency of such occurrences in national vs. colonial contexts is a difference that makes all the difference. “If the World War begins” Weil worries, all of Europe could become “a colonial territory,” subject to the abuse and exploitation France carries out in its own colonies.⁶⁴ By using the colonial situation to highlight the difference between citizens - even oppressed citizens - and enslaved subjects, Weil recognizes the precious, fragile achievements of citizenship in the nation without recapitulating the idealized mythologies that mask national abuses.

Moreover, when Weil draws on the subjective, subject perspective of colonized peoples to distinguish national defense from imperial expansion, she denies French patriots the right to sacrifice others’ freedom for the sake of their own. Linked to decolonization, defense limits rather than justifies imperial claims. In this conception, national defense must be the defense of her territory against invasion, not the defense of a system of treaties and pacts drawn up by her at a time when she could believe herself the most powerful country.⁶⁵

Along with other imperial imperatives, maintaining a colonial foothold in Morocco and a ready supply of coerced labor from Indochina no longer count among the requirements of national defense. Thus reconceived, defense requires

a complete transformation of military procedure…to constitute a sort of compromise between the methods of war and those of insurrection… Political, economic, and social life in France could be decentralized, dense centers of population dispersed…possible armed resistance could be decentralized as well…(M)odern technique, especially because of the

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speed of communications, makes a particular form of resistance possible that would more closely resemble guerrilla warfare than regular war.\(^{66}\)

Months before the invasion, Weil proposes a nationally-coordinated effort to organize all of France as a resistance movement ahead of time.\(^{67}\) Note that the restructuring she proposes is political as well as military. As such, it “is suitable only for citizens. Not only does it demand that French citizens have civic feeling and actually possess the rights of citizens, but, above all, it can only be an idle dream as long as all the territories under the authority of the French state contain more slaves than citizens.” In a final recasting of the neo-Spartacist maxim she has long since abandoned, she declares “the choice now before us is to make citizens of these slaves, or to become slaves ourselves,” either to a domestic regime that represses political freedoms in the name of defense or to the hostile regime across the border.\(^{68}\)

Freeing colonial subjects offers a further benefit to the cause of France’s defense. Although Weil set had out to question the equivalence of defense and attack, she concedes that “a defensive tactic…(b)y itself… is not likely to succeed. Some kind of offensive is indispensable.” The kind of offensive she proposes is “a positive force, but not in the field of violence and will-to-power” where Germany has France defeated

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\(^{66}\) “Reflections on Bouché’s Lecture.”(1938) In Ibid. pp. 269-272. Henri Bouché, a specialist in aeronautics and member of the Anti-Fascist Vigilance Committee of scholars and intellectuals, had proposed that France radically decentralize its civil defense against air attacks. Aerial bombardment, he argued, rendered centralized defenses more vulnerable. Weil expanded on his thesis, arguing for decentralization as a strategic principle of defense and of political life in general.

\(^{67}\) Although clearly informed by her experience as a veteran of the militias in Spain, Weil contrasts her current proposals to the specific methods of the Spanish Republicans - a resistance movement she now regards as a mirror image of the forces it opposed. See also the “Letter to Bernanos.”

\(^{68}\) Weil, Formative Writings, 1929-1941. pp. 271-272.
already. Rather, as France attempts to check German aggression, it must look beyond “the mere preservation of what exists.” Weakened on the world stage, France can longer be generous to the enemies that threaten it. But toward the colonies, France can still exercise the generosity on which it prides itself – and in doing so, learn what it means to be generous. Freeing the colonies thus provides moral as well as material support for national defense efforts, and it brings France closer in reality to its idealized self-conception. “All serious men who love liberty must be able to be glad that France exists. We think this is now the case, but we are mistaken. It is our responsibility that it should begin to be so.”

As Weil draws closer to the nation-state, she redraws its contours and challenges the sensibilities of those who reside comfortably within. She brings anti-colonial insight to bear on those who take the nation’s benevolence as both a fact and a defining characteristic. She tells her fellow-citizens: if you want to protect yourselves from the German threat as well as from France’s descent into “mild dictatorship,” you will first have to recognize that your nation is other than you think. You have to accept responsibility for colonial atrocity and domestic abuses of power - and then do something new and unexpected about them. It is not a question of altruism: this is the only positive, “offensive” power left to you in your own defense. Recognize your nation as it is, and work to change it for the better, or risk losing it forever.

That Weil reconceives “national defense” as compatible with decolonization and with decentralized, participatory political action does not simply leave her free to assume

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a wholehearted allegiance to the nation going forward. Irreducible problems with nationality remain. Weil knows that her “conception of defense presupposes real public-spiritedness…”\textsuperscript{70} – a sense of pride and attachment to France capable of sustaining a popular, guerilla-style resistance. But she also knows that to encourage public-spiritedness \textit{without interrogating the character of the public in question} will participate in and justify statist oppression, particularly colonial oppression.

This problem is aptly illustrated by Weil’s exchange with the playwright Jean Giraudoux. Mere months before the German invasion, she heard a patriotic radio address in which Giraudoux, in his capacity as the Minister of Information,\textsuperscript{71} appealed to the bonds of affection between France and her colonial domains.\textsuperscript{72} In response, Weil expressed her desire to share in the patriotic sentiment Giraudoux enjoined, but she contradicted his reading of the colonies’ significance for patriotism. Citing the litany of colonial abuses, especially the practice of impressing colonial subjects into military service, she asked “(h)ow many men have we deprived of a patrie whom we now compel to die in order to preserve ours?” Aware that merely raising such questions put her in

\textsuperscript{70} Weil, \textit{Formative Writings, 1929-1941.} p. 270.

\textsuperscript{71} Giraudoux is better known as the author of the play “Tiger at the Gates,” which Weil had seen, admired, and responded to in her own \textit{Iliad} essays. Weil’s reading of the \textit{Iliad} is quite different from Giraudoux’s, and probably intentionally so. His Troy clearly represents France and his Greek “tiger at the gates” stands in for Germany. By contrast, Weil’s “Guerre” and “Poem of Force” regard all participants in the war as victims of its logic. Moreover, Weil stresses the ambiguity of sympathies in Homer’s \textit{Iliad} – as I discuss below. By 1939, Giraudoux had become an anti-Semitic, pro-imperial propagandist for the French government. Weil’s critical letter shows her disappointment at this transformation. For more on the background to Weil’s \textit{Iliad} essays, see Christopher Benfey’s \textit{Introduction} to Simone Weil and Rachel Bespaloff, \textit{War and the Iliad}, trans., Mary McCarthy (New York: New York Review Books, 2005).

\textsuperscript{72} As would de Gaulle’s first radio address from London: “France is not alone … (she has) her vast empire.” John Simpson, ed. \textit{The Oxford Book of Exile} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). p. 265.
violation of France’s new sedition laws,\textsuperscript{73} she informed the minister that “a life sentence would not hurt me more than the impossibility in which I find myself of thinking that the cause of France is just.”\textsuperscript{74} Clearly, Weil’s hypothetical redefinition of national defense did not solve or displace the problematic nature of the actual nation whose defense she advocated. One could not, in her view, merely call for more patriotism or martial spirit without simultaneously working (critical and theoretical as well as political and policy work) to make France itself into an object more worthy of attachment, commitment, and effort. Over the next few years she would work continuously to augment the possibility “of thinking that the cause of France is just.”

\textbf{From the Threshold of the World to that of the Church}

By the time the French government declared Paris an “open city,” the German offensive had been underway for some time. Weil was holding out in hope that the capital city would be defended.\textsuperscript{75} Now she consented to flee at once with her parents. By the time they arrived in Marseilles, a port city in Southern France, an armistice had established the Vichy regime. When Weil says of the \textit{Iliad’s} Hektor that “the courage

\textsuperscript{73} Under these laws even citizens’ “ties of affection” to France are enforced, and therefore insincere or fictional, like those of colonial subjects.

\textsuperscript{74} “Letter to Giraudoux,” collected in Weil, \textit{Simone Weil on Colonialism}.

\textsuperscript{75} Pétrement relates that Weil had been appalled to overhear people at the theater saying, “We don’t have to go. The Germans are not savages; it will not be impossible to come to an understanding with them.” Pétrement. p. 377.
that kept him from taking to the shelter of the walls is not enough to save him from flight,” she describes herself.\textsuperscript{76}

The family spent more than a year seeking passage out of the country, during which time Simone sought out early nodes of resistance to the occupation. Unfortunately, Vichy police soon infiltrated these nascent circles. Weil responded to the police’s repeated interrogations and threats of imprisonment with a mix of humor, disarming honesty, and selective silence. She readily admitted her sympathies and admiration for Churchill and England’s resistance to Germany, but she denied knowledge and concealed the identity of her would-be collaborators. Nevertheless, police attention hampered her involvement in underground resistance activities. She lowered her profile and put her energies elsewhere, into the distribution of resistance literature, advocacy for conscripted colonial war workers, and farm work (an extension of her earlier research into working conditions in French factories). All the while she schemed to join the efforts organizing around General de Gaulle in London.\textsuperscript{77}

Weil’s political tactics as a refugee resemble her writing from this period: both oscillate between prudence and courage, defense and self-exposure.\textsuperscript{78} Weil was no


\textsuperscript{77} Pétrement. pp. 378-380.

\textsuperscript{78} The strengths and weaknesses of this mix are especially evident in a difficult and often maligned “letter” to the Vichy government. (Reproduced in Pétrement, pp. 443-444.) Weil had hoped to secure a teaching post in Morocco as a means to escape France and make her way to London and the Free French. When her request was denied, she guessed she had been classified as a Jew. The resulting letter to the Ministry of Education does at least three distinct, possibly incompatible things at once. First, it challenges and deconstructs the government’s racial categories as fundamentally absurd. On top of that, it challenges the likely classification as particularly absurd in Weil’s personal case, distinguishing her from other Jews. This is the part of the letter that raises the most objections from later commentators. However, the letter also \textit{alerts} the government to the fact that Weil is a Jew, since she does not know whether the government has
stranger to writing under persecution. Even before the invasion her work had been censored\textsuperscript{79} and sedition outlawed, but living under Vichy as a Leftist, Jewish refugee raised the stakes much higher. In Marseilles, Weil began to use a pseudonym and to address politics indirectly through essays on science, philosophy, education, history, and religion. Still, although the words “war” and “empire” no longer appear in their titles, the Marseilles writings pursue the old questions about power and conquest in new ways - ways a threatened refugee may travel in \textit{relative} safety during the fundamentally risky search for better conditions.

That Weil should change tactics while being hounded by Vichy police is not in itself surprising. What is noteworthy is that these subtler, \textit{fugitive} (re-fugitive?) ways of writing and thinking – strategic but not \textit{merely} strategic – left their mark after Weil secured asylum and took a position in the Free French Organization. From Marseilles to London, Weil’s refugee writings migrate ceaselessly between security and risk, conditions as they are and as they might be, reality and utopia, this world and the other-worldly.\textsuperscript{80} Several works in particular chart Weil’s increasing migrations between concrete, worldly concerns and utopian, even otherworldly ideals.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{79} Only the middle portion of the “Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism” could be published. It compared Hitler’s methods to those of ancient Rome, while the other portions applied similar comparisons to France. Weil, \textit{Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943}. p. 89. fn.

\textsuperscript{80} Biographers, such as Miles in Weil, \textit{Simone Weil: An Anthology}. 162., and John Hellman, \textit{Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982)., often refer to an anti-political, other worldly, or abstract “turn” in Weil’s thinking at this point. They rarely note the obvious coincidence of this turn with Weil’s precarious position. Right up until the invasion she writes on concrete political problems. As soon as she obtains asylum in New York City, she produces essays on colonialism and the
“The Poem of Force,” her most famous work, actually revisits themes Weil addressed in “Guerre.” But where “Guerre” took the Iliad as an analogy for European conflict, “Poem” addresses war-torn France from and through the gates of Troy, performing in itself the dual strategy Weil ascribes to her subject: “Whatever is not war, whatever war destroys or threatens, the Iliad wraps in poetry; the realities of war, never.” In her “Poem” as much as the Iliad itself, “(t)he cold brutality of the deeds of war is left undisguised” and “neither victors nor vanquished are admired, scorned, or hated.”

For Weil, the Iliad’s selective conferral and denial of poetry results in its “sense of equity.” The fact that “(o)ne is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan” forms the Iliad’s particular “genius,” and the reason for its enduring influence.

Speculating as to the source of its equanimity, she suggests the poem may have originated as a story for a conquered people about its own history as a conquering people:

If one believes with Thucydides that eighty years after the fall of Troy, the Achaeans in their turn were conquered, one may ask whether these songs are not the songs of a conquered people, of whom a few went into exile. Obliged to live and die ‘very far from the homeland,’ … they saw their own image both in the conquerors, who had been their fathers, and in the

81 Both of the works I discuss here were published during Weil’s lifetime in Cahiers du Sud, a literary journal focused on Cathar studies in Southern France, and one of the few publications still running during the war.

82 Weil, Simone Weil: An Anthology. p. 190.

83 Ibid. pp. 190-191.
conquered, whose misery was like their own...They could (therefore) look at (the war) as conquered and an conquerors simultaneously, and so perceive what neither conqueror nor conquered ever saw for both were blinded.\textsuperscript{84}

From the parallax between conquered and conqueror’s perspectives, the Iliad provides insight into the impermanence of power and the essential vulnerability of all human life. From it we “learn that there is no refuge from fate, (and) not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate,”\textsuperscript{85} an inconceivable lesson from the sole perspective of either combatant or victim subject to the domain of Force.\textsuperscript{86}

Weil admits her interpretation is conjectural, grounded in the “tone” of the poem itself and with little independent historical evidence. But her goal is not to establish a particular reading of the Iliad as the definitive historical account. Rather, she hopes to find guidance for her own time, in her own conquered home. In “Guerre”, Weil suggested that perpetual military mobilization was an “impasse from which humanity can only escape by some miracle.” Now, she says of the Iliad, “\textit{this poem is a miracle}.” She cannot truly explain how it came into being, but she recognizes its “sense of human misery” as one of the preconditions of peace and justice. It is a surprise of history, an unaccountable gift to subsequent generations. She holds out for the possibility that a similar newness may yet occur.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. p. 191.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. p. 195.

\textsuperscript{86} By contrast, Weil recounts that “up to June 1940, various articles appeared in the French press, by way of patriotic encouragement, comparing the Franco-German conflict to the Trojan war, and explaining how the latter was already then a struggle between civilization and barbarism, the barbarians being the Trojans.” Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 221.

\textsuperscript{87} Weil, \textit{Simone Weil: An Anthology}. p. 192.
With the Iliad’s model in mind, then, Weil turns to another epic poem: the medieval “Song of the Crusade Against the Albigensians,” which relates the fall of Occitanian or Languedocian civilization in what is now Southern France. Like the Iliad, the Song memorializes “an entire civilization in its prime, dealt a sudden death blow (and) fated to disappear forever.” In this case, however, the civilization was destroyed by the French Crown and the Papacy, and the destruction is regarded thereafter as an important step in French nation-building. The Song therefore speaks directly to French national identity. Moreover, unlike the Iliad, the Song’s narrator is a “partisan of the threatened city” of Toulouse. Instead of impartial “equity,” it displays a “blend of passion and impartiality” reflecting Weil’s own experience as an internally conflicted resister. Although she regards the Iliad as “a miracle” in the Western tradition, she judges the “Song” superior as worldly history. Its partial balance provides a better guide for those working to resist conquest and its effects.

Yet Weil seeks a miracle still. In recounting the Song in the context of Vichy France, she temporarily assumes for herself the role of Homer. As a partisan of her own threatened city, she shares the perspective of the Song’s narrator. But with a prophetic view toward the hoped-for time of the city’s liberation, she sings to her uprooted

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88 The song has two parts and two narrators. The first justifies the French conquerors, the second defends their victims. Weil only discusses the second half – another indication of her partial impartiality.

89 Weil, Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943. p. 35.

Moreover, Weil saw Languedoc as an alternative tradition to that of metropolitan empire over provincial and colonial holdings. In both “Epic Poem” and (especially) in “Romanesque Renaissance,” she finds in Languedoc the values of prize et parage, tolerance, and good cathar-catholic relations. Like the “fanciful” reading of the Iliad, her reading of the Song is idealized, impossible to fulfill, a utopia of the past. But she hopes France will aspire to such an ideal. Weil, Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943. pp. 35-54.
compatriots of the destruction of another civilization in its prime. She sings of their forefathers’ responsibility for the conquests of Toulouse and Carcassonne (which prefigure those of Morocco and Indochina). She does so precisely while they themselves are victims of conquest. If she and her conquered compatriots should be fortunate enough to found a French civilization once more, she offers a cultural inspiration grounded in the parallax view between conqueror and conquered, all so that her polity’s future may be other than its past. Thus this apparently antiquarian essay takes up the crucial project she had enjoined before the war: to reconceive France as an object worthy of attachment and public-spirited, martial, resistance activities. The Homeric, miraculous, impartial moment of her “Epic Poem” provides a prophetic vision to guide and inspire the shorter-term, partial, political work on behalf of the “threatened city.”

The increasing tension in Weil’s late thinking between worldly and otherworldly orientations (particularly evident in “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations,” “Human Personality,” and The Need for Roots) expresses itself politically as movement among various “worlds” (of party, church, nation-state, etc.) within this world. Put more strongly: the tension Weil experienced among various worlds within the world provided the occasion for her to ontologize tension, situating herself not only among party, church, and nation-state but also between those worlds and a transcendent otherworld, unknowable by the human mind. For Weil, betweenness characterizes the realms of politics and metaphysics alike, calling for migratory practices (including withdrawal as a mode of engagement) in each.  

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In this context, Weil began to seriously consider baptism into the Roman Catholic Church. She traced her initial, personal attraction to Christianity to three “conversion” experiences in the late 1930s. Each took place abroad during a period of rest and recovery (from her exhausting factory work in the first instance, afterwards while plagued with migraines). Each was connected with a feeling of relief from the pains that racked her body, relief found in transcendent experiences that could “tear my thoughts from my body and transport (me) to a place where there is neither perspective nor point of view.”

“At the same time,” however, she associated this transcendent state with “silence” and had therefore been largely silent on religious matters in writing. But as the “miraculous” impartiality of the Iliad came to seem to her a necessary condition for positive, worldly action, she began to relate her mystical spiritual experiences to her political sensibilities. The imposed political silence of her exile allowed another persona to emerge, the spiritual subject to co-dwell with the political. In Catholic and mystic conceptions of prayer, she found a discipline of attention that might enable one, through practice, to endure the sight or experience of suffering long enough to learn from and respond to it.\(^{91}\)

Weil had hitherto looked to the institutional church only as a kind of political balance against the “vulgar materialism”\(^{92}\) at work in the ascendant totalitarian systems (thus she had appealed to Emmanuel Mounier to bring the Catholic Worker movement


into closer association with the CGT, before Communists had consolidated their influence.\textsuperscript{93} Her own spiritual journey was individualistic, and informed her political work somewhat indirectly (the “miracle” in “Guerre”). However, in Marseilles she soon made two friends who would invite her to think of Christianity differently, not as a set of abstract principles or ideas but as a concrete community that she should join – through baptism.

The first of these was J. M. Perrin, a Dominican Friar who - in addition to collaborating with the Resistance\textsuperscript{94} - helped refugees in Marseilles secure work, housing, and other needs. Perrin in turn introduced Weil to the lay theologian (and moderate Vichy-apologist\textsuperscript{95}) Gustave Thibon, who for two months hosted Weil at his rural property and helped her find work with grape harvesters in the region. In Perrin and Thibon she found not only connections to the French countryside but a pair of spiritual confidantes whose friendship supplied a model for reconciliation amid political divisions.\textsuperscript{96} She held lengthy discussions with each about Church doctrine, trying to parse out essential from non-essential tenets.

\textsuperscript{93} Pétrement. pp. 290-291.

\textsuperscript{94} He was likely Weil’s connection to \textit{Témoignage Chrétien}, a Christian Resistance journal Weil distributed after police surveillance prevented her from taking a more direct role in resistance activities.


\textsuperscript{96} Always thinking about the implications for France’s future, she would later bemoan the tendency of the FFO’s members to disparage those who, like Thibon, had supported Vichy. For Weil, the collaboration was a collective moral failure, not a matter of individual character. She asked what it would have taken for France to respond to Germany as Languedoc had responded to the Crusade, when Southern Catholics and Cathars alike had stood alongside one another against the royal and Church assault. Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 226.
However, she remained a radical in the tradition of the French Left, retaining her anticlerical suspicion of the Church’s historical oppressions and appending to it her preoccupation with the Albigensian Crusade, an event as important to the consolidation of European Christendom as to that of France. Although she desired participation in the Church’s communion, she consistently (and somewhat infamously) maintained a principled refusal of baptism, which she continually defended in letters to Perrin as she and her family left Marseilles for asylum in the U.S.

Weil cited many doctrinal obstacles to her church membership, the most determinative of which was the Church’s practice of anathematizing heresy. Prior to Vatican II, the Latin phrase “anathema sit” followed declarations of infallible doctrine and mandated the attitude to be adopted toward disbelievers, as in the injunction: “If anyone says that baptism is ...not necessary for salvation, anathema sit.”97 In other words: regard that person as heretical, banished, accursed – too different for communion or community. For Weil, the Church's use of the specific formula "anathema sit" to protect orthodoxy resulted in an exclusion of both ideas and persons that was dangerous in its categorical finality.98

Weil conceded that the Church had a right to excommunicate members and to declare doctrinal positions, but she identified in the tenor and enforcement of anathema sit an "abuse of power" in which the Church “claims to force love and intelligence to model their language upon her own.” This abuse of power, she maintained, rendered the

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97 Council of Trent, seventh session.

98 Weil, Waiting for God. pp. 11, 33.
Church blind to claims of truth or justice when they appeared in unexpected forms or from unanticipated sources, including “(a)ll the immense stretches of past centuries…all the countries inhabited by colored races, all secular life in the white people’s countries,…all the traditions banned as heretical, those of the Manicheans and Albigenses for instance…”

To the conceptual oppression of *anathema sit* Weil attributed the Church’s complicity in institutional and political oppression from the Albigensian Crusade, during which the Church became the first entity to “establish a rough sort of totalitarianism in Europe,” to Franco’s Spain, where the militias Weil once supported had by now lost their struggle against the dictator. Finally, reflecting her anticolonial concerns, she noted the ongoing close associations between colonialism and missionary activity, the tendency of battleships to accompany preachers (or vice versa) to the mission field. Although she saw a role for the Church in opposing totalitarianism, and admired Perrin’s religiously-motivated resistance activities, she warned her friend not to defend the Church on the basis of its temporarily subaltern position.

The Church today defends the cause of the indefeasible rights of the individual against collective oppression, of liberty of thought against tyranny. But these are causes readily embraced by those who find themselves momentarily to be the least strong…In order that the present attitude of the Church should be effective…she would have to say openly that she had changed or wished to change. Otherwise, who could take her seriously when they remembered the Inquisition?

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99 Ibid. pp. 32-36.

100 Ibid. p. 37.

101 Weil, *Letter to a Priest.* pp. 31-33, 84.

For Weil it would not be enough for the Church merely (and opportunistically) to abandon the oppressive methods of its ancient and recent pasts. It would have publicly and doctrinally to adopt a more penitent attitude toward its own history. So long as it had not done so in an official, public, capacity, Weil concluded that she had a vocation to remain “on the threshold of the Church”\(^{103}\) where she could attend both to the church’s dogmas and to excluded sources of truth and wisdom. 

In the letters to Perrin, Weil draws on manifold spatial and directional connotations of “threshold” to convey the complex interplay of tensions that led her to adopt a position there. Sometimes she speaks as though she were detained on her way in, "stopped on...the threshold" or “prevent(ed) ... from crossing” by doctrinal obstacles, despite the Church’s attraction for her.\(^ {104}\) Other times she says she paused there of her own volition to direct her attention outside toward the many non-Christian things and people she loves and respects, the force of attraction emanating from without.\(^ {105}\) In the most-quoted passage she claims she has not moved at all: “I have always remained at this exact point, on the threshold of the Church, without moving, quite still, ἐν ὑπομένω.”\(^ {106}\) However, the Greek phrase “ἐν ὑπομένω” denotes not only “waiting” but endurance,

\(^{103}\) Ibid. p. 32.

\(^{104}\) Ibid. pp. 11, 33.

\(^{105}\) Ibid. pp. 32, 48.

\(^{106}\) “in waiting”: Weil prefers this word to the Latin “en patientia”, the root of our “patience”. Ibid. p. 32.
withstanding, resistance, and survival. It implies directed energy in stillness.\textsuperscript{107} Taken together with her references to stopped entry and outward-facing attention, Weil’s position \( \epsilon ν \upsilon \rho ομένω \) suggests oscillation among and toward competing influences or pressures.\textsuperscript{108} At once patient and tense, Weil’s responsive conscience and readily migrating sympathies appear slow only in contrast to the urgent invitations of those who want her to come inside now, before the forces of war or her own poor health kill her.\textsuperscript{109}

At the same time, Weil stresses the vocational aspect of her decision. She conceives her task at the threshold as an address to those within the Church, drawing their attention outside, but also as an address to those outside the Church, drawing them toward and into participation in its project (she even advises her brother to baptize his daughter!).\textsuperscript{110} In short, Weil recognizes that to remain at the Church’s threshold requires that a Church exist. Someone, some many others, must be in the church as a precondition to her vocation. That vocation, in turn, addresses the necessary incompleteness of their community (as she put it to Perrin, the Church’s failure to be “truly Catholic”) and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{A few months later, Weil better understood how her stillness resulted from tension: “The bonds which attach me to the Catholic faith become ever stronger and stronger…But at the same time the thoughts which separate me from the Church also gain in force and clarity.” Weil, \textit{Letter to a Priest}. p. 11.}

\footnote{Oscillation is a recurring theme in Weil’s political writings: “The essence (centre) of the contradiction inherent in patriotism is that one’s country (patrie) is something limited whose demands are unlimited. In times of extreme peril, it demands everything. Why should one accord everything to something which is limited? On the other hand, not to be resolved to give it everything in case of need is to abandon it entirely, for its preservation cannot be assured at any lesser price. So one always seems to be either on the debit or the credit side of what is due to it, and if one remains too long on the credit side, one swings later on with all the greater force back on to the debit side, through a process of reaction.” Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 155.}

\footnote{Perrin and Thibon contrast themselves to Weil: “those who inhabit the house…find warmth and shelter there and do not trouble to test the foundations or to explore all the corners…” Perrin and Thibon. p. 147.}

\footnote{Pétrement. p. 481.}
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prophetically points all of the Church’s members beyond its bounds, beyond the limits of their experiences and expectations.\textsuperscript{111}

The combination of self-assigned or assumed vocation and universal address in the threshold sensibility is among its most difficult aspects to conceive and practice. Philosophers and political theorists prefer generalizable norms, categorical imperatives or, at least, expectations of citizenship that apply to all mature, independent adults within a polity. Weil’s threshold sensibility, by contrast, amounts to a universal invitation to particular judgment. It is universal only in the sense that it assumes any given person might be called to the threshold, and in its call to each and all to be prepared at some time to go there.\textsuperscript{112}

Resistance, Refounding, and Resignation

Alongside her spiritual inquiries, Weil campaigned for a place among de Gaulle’s Free French, hoping its networks would give her the chance to reenter national territory in a clandestine capacity. Like Machiavelli shopping around his résumé, she tirelessly promoted her plan for a “front-line nursing squad,” a non-combatant first-aid project she

\textsuperscript{111} It is worth noting that Vatican II ushered in many of the sorts of changes Weil wished to see in the Church: abandonment of the phrase anathema sit; organized efforts to engage other faiths in dialogue; and a public, official reversal on freedom of conscience. Weil had some influence on these changes – Pope Paul VI, the ecumenist who presided over the Second Vatican Council from his ascension in 1963 until 1965, cited her as a major philosophical influence. Thus, the Church as it exists today – while by no means perfect – would likely pass the muster of Weil’s tests for membership. She does not insist on total agreement or purity in the community – only that the community’s public principles (it’s “structure” in the sense of unstable order described in “Guerre”) be such that progress and recognition of faults are more possible than not.

had developed prior to the invasion. Together with decolonization, the non-combatant nursing squad was supposed to form a positive, “offensive” moral force to inspire and distinguish threatened France from imperial Germany’s “violence and will to power.” After the invasion, she recast the plan as an opportunity for women like herself to make a material and moral contribution to the Resistance militias.¹¹³

At last she secured a position in the FFO’s Commission of the Interior and Labor, and she immediately set sail for London.¹¹⁴ After eighteen days of detention and interrogation by British security, she began working as an editor, translator, and political analyst. To her great disappointment, she was deemed too high-profile and too stereotypically Jewish in appearance to send on clandestine missions of any kind.¹¹⁵ Despite her disappointment (and her continual efforts to convince her superiors to change their minds), she set to work and in a few months produced an incredible quantity of writing on constitutional plans, party politics, legitimacy, and other philosophical problems related to France’s refounding.

The organization she joined was not yet a government-in-exile, and General de Gaulle’s status among the Allied leaders was still unsettled. In terms of France’s social contract tradition this was a revolutionary moment, owing not to popular insurrection but to the government’s dereliction of duty to protect its people from hostile invaders. A crisis of legitimacy attended the crisis of conquest. Thus sabotage efforts were


¹¹⁴ By this time, she was in asylum in New York City, where her parents remained until her death.

¹¹⁵ Pétrement. p. 514.
accompanied by theoretical inquiry into the problem of France’s refounding.\textsuperscript{116} Within the diverse networks of resistance, participants argued about the degree and character of France’s unsought revolutionary moment. Some wanted to refound the government from existing sources of authority (largely military) while others sought a more thorough refounding of political society itself.\textsuperscript{117}

In her Resistance-era writings, Weil advocates for the latter while assigning a crucial role to de Gaulle and his organization. For her, France’s crisis of legitimacy predates the war. Thanks to the suspension of free speech and the official \textit{requirement} of declared consent under the pre-war “regime of decree-laws,” - problems she had cited in the Letter to Giraudoux - “Republican legitimacy already no longer existed.” Moreover, Weil argues that pre-war France was characterized by “general public indifference and even contempt” for its Constitution,\textsuperscript{118} so that in the invasion of 1940 not only the authorities but the nation as a whole “opened its hands and allowed its patrie to fall to the ground.” As a result, “constitutional legality can no longer be regarded as having an historical basis” in earlier processes of ratification and consent. A legitimate government “must be made to derive from the eternal source of all legality…the depths of popular

\textsuperscript{116} Sample publications and documents from these conversations are collected in Henri Michel and Boris Mirkine-Guetzevitch, eds., \textit{Les Idées Politiques Et Sociales De La Résistance (Documents Clandestins, 1940-1944)} (Paris: Presses Universitaries de France, 1954).

\textsuperscript{117} Their proposals range from a dictatorship of the proletariat to restoration of the monarchy to the renunciation of empire. Thus Weil the former Marxist revolutionary takes up the revolutionary project once again. This time, however, she finds revolutionary circumstances resulting from political order’s implosion. This revolution will not require building a movement that will likely generate bureaucracy in its wake. The revolution is upon her.

\textsuperscript{118} An outcome of the problems she had observed in Guerre, the “vacuous abstraction” of the nation and its actual existence as Empire.
feeling.” Public indifference and betrayal undid legitimacy. Only public assent can restore it.\textsuperscript{119}

Unfortunately, popular feeling itself remains suspect in this moment, and not just because of the collaborationists. Weil cautions her peers not to trust the regret and nostalgia for republican order that now “reappear in the thoughts of those in exile.” A mere “return…to the political structure of the Third Republic” would soon find circumstantial “loyal enthusiasm” giving way to “dull resignation” - a return to pre-war public apathy.\textsuperscript{120} “June 1940 was not a conspiracy by a treacherous elite,” she says. “It was a failure, an abdication, on the part of the whole nation.”\textsuperscript{121} Not only the government but the people must be reconstituted.

Weil calls for “a universal effort to invent a new France” as the precondition to government by consent.\textsuperscript{122} In the context of this project, she casts de Gaulle in a role analogous to that of Rousseau’s “legislator” or “lawgiver” whose “office…is neither magistracy nor sovereignty,” and who “constitutes the republic (but) does not enter into its constitution (and) has nothing in common with the dominion over men.”\textsuperscript{123} For Weil, de Gaulle will be not a Father of France but a midwife to French political society.

\textsuperscript{119} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. pp. 178-179.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. pp. 178-179.

\textsuperscript{121} Weil, "The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government." p. 88.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. p. 91.

\textsuperscript{123} “Thus we find together in the work of legislation two things that seem incompatible an undertaking that transcends human force, and, to execute it, an authority that is nil.” \textit{On the Social Contract}, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, \textit{The Basic Political Writings} (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987). pp. 163-164.
According to this conception, de Gaulle’s authority derives not from diplomatic recognition by foreign heads of state but from the fact that he “picked up the legitimacy that had been cast aside and made himself its custodian … until the nation is in a position to take it back.” His own “legitimacy” derives from his performance of a task he has assumed and from a general, tacit acceptance of his custodial role among those loyal to France – not sufficient for the founding of a governmental order. Weil therefore challenges the FFO’s focus on obtaining diplomatic recognition from the Allies. For her, the desire to become a government-in-exile is premature.\(^{124}\)

Moreover, Weil expects de Gaulle – like Rousseau’s Legislator\(^ {125}\) - to leave the scene once proper political authority is established. She calls on the FFO to renounce all pretensions to long-term governmental authority and focus on exercising the specific type of pre-governmental authority they already enjoy.\(^ {126}\) In her view,

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\text{the French movement in London is in the best possible position imaginable, if only it knows how to make use of it. The movement is neither more nor less official than what is required in order to be able to speak in the name of the country.}^{127}\ 	ext{Not possessing any governmental authority – even a nominal, fictitious authority (it is) based entirely upon free consent…}^{128}
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\(^{124}\) Weil, “The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government.” p. 89.

\(^{125}\) Rousseau. pp. 181-182.

\(^{126}\) Weil, "The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government." p. 92.

\(^{127}\) pays

\(^{128}\) Weil, The Need for Roots. pp. 195-196. See also p. 192: “It is a strange blindness that has brought about, in a situation charged with such marvelous possibilities, the desire to descend to the vulgar, banal position of an émigré government.”
For a governor, the purely tacit, even potential consent de Gaulle possesses would be insufficient. For a Rousseauan legislator with “neither magistracy nor sovereignty,” it is precisely what the moment requires.

Still, the FFO faces the difficulty (among others) that Rousseau assigned to his Legislator: it is custodian for a people as yet unready to govern itself. Rousseau characterizes the problem as one of causal paradox:

For an emerging people to be capable of appreciating the sound maxims of politics…the effect would have to become the cause…men would be, prior to the advent of laws, what they ought to become by means of laws. Since, therefore, the legislator is incapable of using either force or reasoning, he must of necessity have recourse to an authority of a different order, which can compel without violence and persuade without convincing.129

Rousseau goes on to identify “authority of a different order” as the appeal to divine, otherworldly authority. As Honig has argued, Rousseau does not actually accomplish closure of the paradox by reference to the divine. For instead of giving us the account of divine inspiration that would firmly ground the legislator’s authority, he warns us to watch out for imposters. The Legislator is marked only by the “true miracle” of his own “great soul.” Judgment about the Legislator’s veracity and wisdom ultimately resides with the people he is supposed to mold, and the paradox recurs.130

Echoing Rousseau, Weil thinks the FFO’s position has “something of a spiritual power about it,” based on neither “physical power” nor military “glory.” But bypassing a direct appeal to the divine (even one that is later undermined by the blurred line between


great soul and deceptive pretender), Weil’s Legislator will find “inspiration” in “the depths of (France’s) misfortune.” The FFO’s “different order” of authority derives from attending to “the actual needs of mankind in distress,” and only then can it contrive “sound maxims of politics.” By first listening and then speaking to the thoughts, priorities, fears, and aspirations of its compatriots, the FFO may itself “compel without violence and persuade without convincing.” Resistance radio broadcasts and resistance publications already convey messages in one direction. But founding authority requires more insight into the thoughts, feelings, aspirations, and priorities of the conquered people these communications address. Under the profoundly undialogical circumstances of war (and war-induced revolution), Weil calls for more dialogical processes now with a view to the military struggle’s end (its terminus as well as its telos). She regards these as equally important to the country’s liberation and to the post-war refounding.

In this context, Weil separates the Legislator into two powers: the authoritative voice “emanating” from London and a “receiving organization” or “registering apparatus” made up of “observers” working from Occupied and Vichy France to convey their impressions to the FFO in London. Elements of Weil’s earlier plan for a “Front-Line Nursing Squad” recur in the receiving organization: the combination of practical with symbolic action, the idea of a “positive force” functioning in the midst of war, and the use of volunteers dedicated explicitly to non-combatant (in this case communicative) actions. Weil’s volunteer “observers” would require a somewhat different set of skills

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than the typical saboteur: empathy, a sense of history, and the ability to capture in writing “delicate shades of meaning and complex relationships.” They would not replace sabotage agents but would serve the FFO both as leader of a militia movement and as midwife to political society’s rebirth.\textsuperscript{132}

To play both these roles, the FFO must recognize that multiple resistance and refounding efforts are already underway, including “embryonic, germinal, roughly sketched organizations still in the process of growth…(T)he authority emanating from London must be used like a tool to shape them discretely and patiently…” By communicating among and relating the diverse nodes of resistance one to another, Weil’s receiving organization would contribute to the realization of the tacit “free consent” she attributes to de Gaulle. Based on information gathered and interpreted by the “observers” the London leadership would exercise authority by ordering “coordinated actions,” which those in the national territory could interpret and enact according to their own judgment and familiarity with conditions on the ground. From the \textit{plurality} of experimental actions interpreting the FFO’s leadership “a living, warm environment,” could emerge, providing opportunities for “intercourse, companionship, and kindness…the sort of humus in which the unfortunate French, uprooted by disaster, can live and find their salvation both in war and in peace.” The decentralized coordination of “public action” would in turn provide “a mode of education for the country.”\textsuperscript{133} Finding moral refuge and political education in

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid. pp. 197, 201.

\textsuperscript{133} Weil has \textit{pays}. As I elaborate in chapter 2, Weil selects her words carefully when discussing the country, nation, and state. Here, the entity being instructed is not yet (or again) a \textit{nation}, but the sum total of peoples within a given territory.
the struggle to liberate the country, “the modalities themselves of action, and those of organizations created for purposes of action” would contribute to the reconstitution of the French as a people able and willing first to liberate and then to govern itself. 134 In this manner, Weil takes the moment of popular sanction or consent in Rousseau’s founding paradox and gives it a central role to play earlier in the process. She does not thereby resolve the paradox, any more than Rousseau did on Honig’s reading. Rather, she situates the separated powers of the Legislator in and around the paradox, drawing attention to the gaps between conquered and sovereign people, custodial resistance leader and government, France as it is and France as it might be. 135

The question of Weil’s own role in the project described above was never far from her mind. I have already compared Weil to Machiavelli in her zeal to secure a place in de Gaulle’s organization and thereby return from exile. But the comparison goes much further. If Weil casts de Gaulle as a Rousseauan legislator-founder, she positions herself as de Gaulle’s Machiavellian counselor. Like Machiavelli, she seeks a leader who can both secure her home and, in doing so, set it up to thrive beyond protection from its enemies (although, having redefined “security,” she also imagines her homeland’s liberty in different terms). Like Machiavelli, who presents himself as a painterly intermediary between the Prince and the People, she presents herself as a prime candidate for

134 Contrast Weil’s highly coalitional and collaborative sense of the resistance movement to Sartre’s abortive attempts to organize an early node of resistance from within Paris. Repeating the mistakes of Trotsky’s plan for the United Front, Sartre and his conspirators made it a priority “to dissociate themselves, on the right, from the Gaullists and, on the left, from the communists…” Their efforts did not last long. Simpson, ed. p. 228

“observer” in the “receiving organization,” a liaison between the custodial founder and the emergent people.\textsuperscript{136}

Weil departs somewhat from the Machiavellian model in her address to a Rousseauan Legislator rather than a Machiavellian founder-Prince. For Machiavellian founding, a strong figure himself generates new modes and orders and then (according to the “republican” reading Weil shares with Rousseau) hands them over to the people.\textsuperscript{137}

In Weil’s take on Rousseauan founding, new modes and orders begin in the founding moment, in the tension between a custodial “different order of authority” and the participatory “modalities themselves of action” and organization. \textit{Weilian} founding resides in open and intentional collaboration and reciprocity between non-governmental authority and a not-yet-People. As counselor-to-founder, Weil attends to the transitional moment – another kind of “threshold” - between political society and government, people and nation-state, revolution and constitution.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, Weil’s plans were deemed impractical by a leadership attuned to military exigencies, unaccustomed to philosophical abstractions, and absorbed in conflict with rival Generals for the backing of the Allied forces. They asked her to work on more “concrete” problems, like how to structure the trade-union movement (a top-down conception of the problem she rejected out of hand). When the FFO (now calling itself the “Fighting French”) finally proclaimed itself a provisional

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\textsuperscript{136} “In view of the extent and complexity of the field to be kept under observation, there ought to be a good many of these observers … anybody who can be used in this way should be used at once, without exception.” Ibid. p. 197.
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\textsuperscript{137} Machiavelli’s counsel to “found on the people” suggests that something akin to Rousseau’s paradox may be at work in \textit{The Prince} as well. Machiavelli. p. 41.
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government-in-exile with the backing of foreign heads of state, Weil felt de Gaulle had overstepped the limits of his unique species of authority. He had crossed the threshold prematurely.\footnote{Pétrement. pp. 503, 514, 528-529.}

That she did not see her aims realized is the final, tragic parallel between Weil and Machiavelli. She had found employment within the administration of the FFO, but she did not obtain the position she sought. With de Gaulle no longer positioned nor disposed to serve as Legislator, she lost her corresponding role as counselor to the refounding. Personally, she mourned the loss of opportunity to pursue what she saw as her vocation (including the chance to risk her life on clandestine missions in French national territory).\footnote{As noted by Dietz and others, Weil’s difficulty submitting to the judgment of others limited her personal ability to participate in the same “coordinated actions” she regarded as essential to the political education of a people. I discuss the limits of Weil’s appreciation for community-based action in Chapter 4. However, I think that Dietz misses something crucial: that the FFO must be a non-state entity for Weil. She sees the FFO as a facilitator of popular sovereignty if it can become a “receiving” rather than only a “telling” organization. As yet, there is no sovereign people (nation), for Weil. The nation has dissolved, and so the possibility of popular expression is approximated by listening. This is a pre-political moment, but no less important for political philosophy. Dietz. p. 183.} Politically, she mourned the missed opportunity to found France along different lines. She had hoped for a more permanent transformation from the imperial, self-congratulatory France into one meriting greater respect, attachment, and efforts from political actors committed to justice. She currently located threatened France on the side of justice, but maintained that “the Allied victory will take her out of
unwilling to resign to a mere restoration of the republic, she resigned from the provisional government.\textsuperscript{141}

In terms of Rousseau’s paradox, Weil may have quit too soon. As Honig reads it, the paradox of founding is not temporally confined but perpetually recurs as a paradox of politics. We can no more finally and accurately discern the wise Legislator than we can the General Will. Moreover, geographical and chronological immigrants (alien entrants and children) continually enter and thereby remake the constitution of the community. Far from confining paradox to a founding moment (there to paper it over with religious authority), Rousseau actually leaves us perpetually in need of democratic judgment of the laws. If this is so, if the constitution of the political community is never final but constantly in need of “embryonic, germinal, roughly sketched organizations”\textsuperscript{142} and other efforts to articulate, implement, and rework it, then Weil could and should have looked forward to other opportunities for foundational counsel.

Still, I would argue that Weil’s dedication to her counseling role itself contributes to future articulations of founding, refounding, and political action – albeit in a limited way. Crucially, she clarified that she did not expect others to leave the Fighting French, and she defended her own decision strictly in terms of her role or vocation. She explained that while she possessed neither desire nor aptitude for “a regular ministerial

\textsuperscript{140} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 136.

\textsuperscript{141} \textit{The Prince} is commonly read as a job application to government that ends with a patriotic call to forge Italy from diverse provinces. I read Weil’s resistance works as a patriotic call to refound a diffuse, deeply federal, porous France (see Chapter 2). The disappointment of those hopes results in her resignation from government.

\textsuperscript{142} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 212.
position,” she did not pretend to legislate for others who “differ in temperament, character, abilities, life objective, and vocation.” In fact, she hoped to be reenlisted in a future Ministry of Education, and she signaled her willingness to work indirectly for the Ministry of the Interior should her current superior regard her theoretical work as important after the war. But she had assumed a vocation to attend to the threshold between political society and government, and she would continue to draw attention to it even after her co-collaborators passed it by. She did not expect others to “remain” there with her, but she would continue to address them from there so that they would not forget this moment, this space, this passed opportunity. In this sense her resignation can be seen as a partial fulfillment of the role she assumed as a communicative liaison or counselor to the refounding – not the product of righteous indignation but a qualified, limited, communicative withdrawal as a mode of engagement in France’s founding.\textsuperscript{143}

**Attending to the Threshold**

Weil resigned her Resistance commission from the hospital, shortly before her death. I have deliberately omitted mention of this circumstance because of its tendency to over-determine interpretations of Weil’s life’s work. Despite her ardent desire to

\textsuperscript{143}See Weil’s resignation letter, reproduced in Pétrement. pp. 530-531. I concede that Weil’s account of political receptivity, generative as it is, is best developed with regard to chronotope of the founding. In Chapter 4 I will read Corbett’s account of the Sanctuary Movement in the Americas as another kind of receiving organization that attends to ongoing threshold spaces and moments in a more sustained way. Civil Initiative finds and works in the founding moments, states of nature, and states of war that continue to cut into and through the polity, calling on governmental authorities and the polity as a whole to realize ever further the promise of political society.
return to France, her death is often read as a “choice” for exile.144 I have instead read
Weil through her encounters with and journeys among worldly institutions: the
Communist Party, the French Nation-State, and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as
the trade-union movement, the Republican militias, and the Free (then Fighting) French
Organization. I characterize her approach to and withdrawal from these projects and
communities as a threshold sensibility rather than a fetish for exile. I leave aside the
work of inquiring into her personal motives and subconscious drives, a task many others
have already undertaken. Politically and publicly, Weil attends to the threshold not
because she desires outsider status145 but for the sake of refuge for herself and for others.

While “threshold” refers to the space below or before any doorway that opens
outside, where potentials for passage and detention are continually negotiated, the French
word Weil actually used to describe her position toward the Church was seuil, something

144 The details of Weil’s illness and death are exhaustively chronicled in almost every biography,
anthology, or introduction to her work. My strategic, selective silence on the matter is an imperfect but, I
believe, necessary corrective permitting closer examination of her political thought. For the reader’s
convenience, and as a nod to the necessary incompleteness of my narrative, I offer too-late this brief
summary of information that usually appears first: Throughout her life Weil struggled with debilitating
headaches, a congenital defect that weakened her hands, and constant difficulties with eating and appetite.
She had been on medical leave from her teaching position since the mid-1930s, and she exhausted herself
working in London for the Free French while refusing to eat any more than the rations she would have been
able to get in Marseilles. Thus weakened, she contracted tuberculosis in London and was interred in a
hospital for two months’ rest and recuperation. Contemporary treatments for tuberculosis included
intentional puncturing of the lung and overfeeding. Weil was unwilling to comply with the first and
possibly unable to comply with the second. Because she did not take her doctor’s suggestions, her death
was ruled a suicide, causing a minor sensation in the press and ongoing debate among her biographers.
I look forward to a time when reference to these events in Weil’s life will be no more or less obligatory and
enlightening than references to Machiavelli’s torture, Gandhi’s diet, Nietzsche’s headaches, or Rousseau’s
abandoned children. Ibid. p. 537.

145 She repeatedly explains in the letters that her personal resistance to membership and identity is so
intense because of the intense attraction for her of membership in a group, which she regards as
incompatible with her philosophical vocation. She also clarifies, “I do not mean everything concerned with
citizenship, but only collective emotions,” although we may rightly question whether she can separate the
between the English “threshold” and “sill”. Laid directly onto stone or concrete foundations, sills delimit the boundaries between inside and outside as well as the boundaries between rooms within a structure. *Seuil* thus adds to the connotations of “threshold” those of foundation, demarcation, and boundaries within sheltering structures. At the *seuil*, Weil calls attention to mythico-historical foundations and founding principles as well as to tensions or divisions cutting across and through membership.\(^{146}\) Her “threshold” refers to manifold, overlapping, and partial inclusions and exclusions far more complex than “friend/enemy” or “insider/outsider” antinomies.\(^{147}\)

Because it troubles insider/outsider distinctions, some scholars (from architects Berrizbeita and Pollack to religious studies scholar Ebrahim Moosa) cite threshold as a multicultural trope to soften divisions and enhance inclusivity.\(^{148}\) But in Weil’s

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\(^{146}\) Throughout Weil’s writings, frequent allusions to walls, gates, doors, frontiers, and boundaries invoke the *seuil* where the term does not itself appear. In *Roots*, for example, she compares cosmopolitan intellectual and scientific endeavors to international travel. She claims that “(t)he State has…turned territorial frontiers into prison walls to lock up people’s thoughts….Frontiers, of course, are not impassable; but just as they subject the traveler to an unending series of irritating and laborious formalities, so in the same way all contact with foreign ways of thinking…demands a mental effort to get across the frontier. The effort required is considerable, and quite a number of people are not prepared to make it.” Here Weil draws on the suspicion, hardship, and inconvenience that characterize the threshold spaces of territorial nation-states to shed light on the boundary-policing around ideologies and worldviews. Weil, *The Need for Roots*. pp. 122-123.


\(^{148}\) “Thresholds hold the potential of an inclusive realm, where the introduction and maintenance of difference is possible. Unlike an idea of inclusion as “melting pot”, where identities are blurred to create an compromised whole, threshold as an operation entails the preservation of differences, as well as the creation of something new from their coexistence.” Anita Berrizbeita and Linda Pollak, *Inside Outside: Between Architecture and Landscape* (Birkhauser, 2001).

Threshold gets a more emphatically positive reading in Moosa’s interpretation of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the early 12th century Islamic philosopher. Moosa identifies Ghazali’s concept of the *dühliz*, a foyer-like space that mediates and eases the transition from outside to inside, as an alternative to the starker transitions and breaks implied by the concept of “border” in the writings of Gloria Anzaldua and the academic literature inspired by her. “Unlike a border that serves as a territorial demarcation between
experience, existing thresholds tended to exclude rather than to extend welcome, while even inclusion can represent a danger as well as a good. As long as the Church’s threshold *anathematized* certain kinds of difference, invitations to cross over into communion appeared to Weil like proprietary claims on her intellect and soul.\(^{149}\) Likewise, during the year she spent working anonymously in Paris factories, Weil found a dangerous, alienating inclusion in the “moment when, having scarcely crossed the threshold of the factory, (the worker) is swallowed up by the undertaking,” appropriated by but not welcomed into the enterprise.\(^{150}\)

Always vigilant against “comforting fiction,”\(^{151}\) Weil starts from the threshold at its least welcoming. Perhaps the most strikingly dangerous threshold she imagines appears in “The Poem of Force,” where she describes Hektor standing alone before the gates of Troy. Hektor has killed Patroclus, and Achilles now rushes in to avenge his friend. Hektor wonders whether he should retreat behind “the shelter of the walls” where his family and compatriots are watching. He also considers meeting Achilles like a host, unarmed, to reason with him. But he feels constrained by choices he has already made: by killing Patroclus and stopping the Greeks’ retreat in order to exact further revenge, he

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sovereign territories and criminalizes improper crossing without authorization, the *dihliz* is not a criminalizing space but a welcoming space.” Moosa’s Ghazali dwells in this welcoming space. His “threshold position” straddles and mediates antinomies between public and private, sacred and secular, Islam and philosophy. Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). p. 48.

\(^{149}\) “Simone Weil needed the Church … the Church does not need Simone Weil.” Perrin and Thibon. p. 146.


squandered a major opportunity for peace. He admits “through my recklessness have I destroyed my own people.” He chooses to meet Achilles in battle before the gates. This threshold in this moment holds little possibility for inclusion, welcome, or reconciliation.\(^{152}\)

Yet it is from this forbidding, war-torn space at the city’s gates that Weil, writing from her own exile, identifies the threshold as a site of hope. Hektor’s internal deliberation represents for her one of the “few, luminous moments” when the potential to “dispel the blindness of combat” interrupts the Iliad’s relentless portrait of force.\(^{153}\) Although ineffectual in the short term, Hektor’s “luminous moment” obtains a different order of effectiveness as a key part of the Iliad’s miracle. It demonstrates that even at its most dangerous, threatening, and constrained, the threshold remains a space where something unexpected can occur, simply because it invites attention, decision and action. The threshold is never an inherently welcoming space one can simply inhabit. Nor is it inherently exclusive. In its relative indeterminateness lie possibilities both hopeful and dangerous. Actualizing or enhancing the potential for refuge (and minimizing exclusion, conquest, or appropriation) requires patient, tenacious collaborations and struggles with those who assert control over the threshold and the spaces onto which it opens. Even a small change in effort or energy there may represent the difference between exile and refuge.

\(^{152}\) Ibid. p. 178.

\(^{153}\) Ibid. p. 186.
Chapter Two: The Good of Refuge

The person in man is a thing in distress; it feels cold and is always looking for a warm shelter…

(For every person there should be enough room, enough freedom to plan the use of one’s time, the opportunity to reach ever higher levels of attention, some solitude, some silence…

If this is the good, then modern societies, even democratic ones, seem to go about as far as it is possible to go in the direction of evil….What man needs is silence and warmth; what he is given is an icy pandemonium.1

In Itself vs. For Itself

I have thus far characterized Weil’s threshold sensibility primarily as an oscillation or tension between engagement and withdrawal. I have emphasized withdrawal as a mode of engagement, while more direct engagements have appeared as a matter of balancing particular institutions against particular evils – in Weil’s words, “to discern which is the side of least injustice and, having joined it, to take up arms and expose oneself to the arms of the enemy.” Although balancing against injustice remained central to her politics, exile impressed upon Weil that these modes of engagement are “not enough” by themselves. Sustaining a “struggle for justice,” she observed, requires “(s)omething to love, not through hating its opposite, but in itself.”2

The object of that love occupied much of Weil’s attention during her tenure with the Free French, where she wrote copiously on the liberation, restoration, and refounding of France. A defeated and war-weary population, she held, could not feel “at home” in the

1 From “Human Personality,” in Ibid. p. 59.

conventional patriotic rhetoric of grandeur and military dominance. “We must give them France to love,” she declared, not “France eternal” but France as “something beautiful and precious … imperfect … very frail and liable to misfortune, and which it is necessary to cherish and preserve.”

Under the shadows of conquest and constitutional dissolution, Weil’s last writings attempt to refashion both the Resistance and the nation itself from repositories of pride and glory into refuge for “struggles for justice” at multiple sites. Taking basic human needs as her starting point, she develops a deeply pluralist vision of “enrooting” community and a corresponding “new conception of patriotism” as “diffuse” and “nomadic” compassion for the vulnerability of peoples and polities. Her writings for the Free French thus provide crucial insight for political theorists working in the fissures of Westphalian order.

On its face, Weil’s claim that we need “(s)omething to love, not through hating its opposite, but in itself” seems at odds with her general hesitation toward partisanship, patriotism, and orthodox “patriotism for the Church.” Crucially however, she distinguishes between regard for something in-itself and for-itself:

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4 I focus on the essays “Human Personality,” “Draft for a Statement Concerning Obligations,” “A War of Religions,” and the book-length treatise L’enracinement (The Need for Roots). As Weil works out complex ideas across these works, she frequently exchanges one term, scheme, or conceptual framework for another. Thus, the several works together tell a story of thought developing over time, and each casts helpful light on the others. However, my immediate purpose is political theory rather than intellectual history, and I attempt only a partial exposition and synthesis of these diverse works. As a general rule, therefore, I give interpretive priority to the last and most complete of these, Roots. I will sometimes use the tensions among the essays as invitations to further inquiry, but I cannot directly address all the challenges posed by reading these texts together. I refer those interested to the works themselves, and to the careful commentaries of Miles, Rhees, and Dietz.
We owe a cornfield respect, *not because of itself*, but because it is food for humanity.\(^5\).

In the same way, we owe our respect to a collectivity, of whatever kind – country, family or any other – *not for itself*, but because it is food for a certain number of human souls…It very often happens (however) that the roles are reversed. There are collectivities which, instead of serving as food, do just the opposite: they devour souls.\(^6\)

Note that with regard to mere collectivities “of whatever kind,” Weil talks of “respect,” not “love” or “commitment.” *Beloved* community or family – I will argue below – must do more than feed “a certain number” of human souls. Nonetheless, it is crucial to Weil that we at least recognize and respect even those that do little more. Just as her imagination of threshold begins at its most forbidding examples, so she starts with mere “collectivity” on her way to the good community.

Weil sees a destructive role reversal at work whenever a “collectivity” takes absolute priority over the soul, the refuge over the refugee. Although it merits respect at least, no “collectivity” should be elevated to the status of an *end in itself*. Thus, when Weil contrasts “love…in itself” to “hating its opposite” she means only that the collectivity should be regarded as a positive good rather than a merely lesser evil.\(^7\)

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5 The English translation has “mankind” where Weil refers to the human species. Although many of Weil’s writings refer to “man,” her later works stress “human beings,” an emphasis that should be retained in their translation.


7 Political theorists are prone to consider Machiavelli’s counsel to choose “the less bad as good” as the alternative to the Platonic or Thomist focus on the good-in-itself.

Weil, an admirer of both Plato and Machiavelli, has a very different sense of her alternatives. She does distinguish between “the right moral approach” and the “least unsatisfactory practical solution,” but she maintains that one cannot recognize the latter without inquiry into the former. Weil, *Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943*. p. 202. Weil, *The Need for Roots*. p. 137. Machiavelli. p. 91. For Weil’s source on the
collectivity in question remains a relative, intermediate good, a mutable fact rather than a principle. It is capable of good, and therefore also of harm. To respect such an entity “in itself” cannot mean, for Weil, to respect it for its own sake, as an end in itself. In fact, to treat the collective or the community as an end-in-itself is for her one of the worst and most common mistakes in public life. It is a mistake with dire consequences for the community as well as those who constitute and are constituted by it.

According to Weil, we commit this mistake most often by “delimiting social areas into which the pair of contradictories, good and evil, may not enter.” Rather than recognize and work through the “opposition of good and evil” in the world, many actors prefer to identify with “a body…which can do no wrong”. They turn their chosen community into an end in itself, making its security or prosperity the very definition of good instead of judging its relative capacities for good and evil, help and harm. This method is often most successful when applied to Nation, Church, or Party – to bodies that “encompass” as much of “the whole man” as possible. “Soldiers” and “priests” especially find it easy to justify the “devastation of cities” or historical crimes like “the Inquisition.” When two of these “social areas” coincide with one another, as in a Church-State or a Single-Party regime, members can feel almost complete freedom from the admixture of good and evil (as Weil had observed of the Soviet Union’s apologists).


8 I follow Phillip Hallie’s intuitive correlation of “good” and “evil” to “help” and “harm,” which of course does not solve the precise definition of help and harm but “demands action” and judgment. Philip Hallie, Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). pp. 26-27.

9 “A War of Religions,” in Weil, Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943. pp. 212-213. Still, this freedom is only illusory, and those who enjoy it know this. Weil interprets systematic torture and other abuses that
Even when it does not coincide with a Church or a Party, the modern nation can become an especially impervious “delimited social area.” Weil notes that before 1940 the French Right talked about “eternal France” as an immutable, unsullied historical principle. In so doing, they put France “beyond good and evil. It is what is expressed in the English saying, ‘Right or wrong, my country.’ But people often go farther. They refuse to admit that their patrie can ever be wrong.” To admit the peccable character of the country as such requires a standard of judgment outside of the country – precisely the thing this patriotic “delimitation” seeks to exclude. Thus, “(p)resent-day patriotism consists in an equation between absolute good and a collectivity corresponding to a given territorial area, namely France.” In drawing this equation, the delimiter refuses to admit that the chosen area might be good in some ways and bad in others, or good for some people and bad for (at the expense of) others.


11 Weil quotes this cliche in English, acknowledging its origins in the U.S. with Stephen Decatur’s famous toast: “Our Country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but right or wrong, our country!” Decatur had obtained fame as a Naval hero in the War of 1812 and, potentially of interest to Weil the anti-colonialist, for his gunboat diplomacy in modern-day Algeria.


13 Theistic patriot Richard John Neuhaus defends the phrase “One Nation Under God” as an invocation of God’s sovereign judgment over the country. In theory, God should bless or damn America depending on the country’s performance (although Neuhaus hints that God could only be angry with acts “done in the name of America” – not with America as such). However, general public hostility to the phrase “God damn America” (on display in the 2008 kerfuffle over Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s sermon) suggests that the American public generally holds itself to always and forever exceptionally “blessed.” Perhaps more frequent use of the phrase “God judge America” rather than “God bless America” (all associated with a day of national post-war contrition on Kant’s model) would serve Neuhaus’ avowed purpose. Richard John Neuhaus, The Naked Public Square, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). p. 76.
“Mistakes” and “corruption” always come from a minority of unrepresentative individuals. Even when these are admitted the nation is invoked in the same breath as an unsullied, immutable idea. It remains perfect in the imagination, while pluralistic, hyphenated, or migratory loyalties appear suspect: “anyone who changes in his mind the territorial term of the equation (between France and good), and substitutes for it a smaller term, such as Brittany, or a larger term, such as Europe, is looked upon as a traitor.” Thus, “my country right or wrong” reveals itself as a declaration of moral judgment’s irrelevance to matters of politics, loyalty, and identity.\(^\text{14}\)

A distinct but parallel move is to treat not the romanticized country but the security of the state as an end in itself. Weil attributes this approach to Charles Maurras, principal theorist of *Action Francaise*,\(^\text{15}\) whose slogan “*Politique d’abord*” or “politics first” she regards as absurdly incomplete, begging further inquiry:

> It is as if one were to say, ‘Mechanics first’. The question which immediately poses itself is this: ‘Politics for what?’ Richelieu would answer: ‘For the greater glory of the State’. And why for this purpose and not for some other one? To this question, no answer is forthcoming. That is the question which musn’t be asked. So-called realist politics, handed down from Richelieu to Maurras…make sense only if this question is not put.\(^\text{16}\)


\(^{15}\) A far-Right, monarchist organization. *Action Francaise* and its principle theorist, Maurras, supported Vichy, but by 1943 a significant minority of its members had defected to the Free French. Another minority supported open collaboration with the Nazis, which Maurras rejected.

While Weil maintains that “the welfare of the state is a cause to which only a limited and conditional loyalty is owed,” the “delimitation of social areas” rules out inquiry into ends, limits, and conditions from the start. As guiding principles, the slogans “politics first,” like “my country right or wrong,” simply dismiss the “opposition between good and evil” in the chosen field. Paradoxically, they end up bound to a good whose claims are absolute and non-negotiable, thereby constraining judgment and action.

Against the method of delimiting social areas, Weil suggests we should regard “collectivities” like the nation-state as

a result of historical events in which chance has played a great part…and where good and evil are always mingled with one another. The nation is a fact, and a fact is not an absolute value. It is just one fact amongst other similar facts. More than one nation exists on the earth’s surface. Ours is certainly unique. But each of the others, considered by itself and with affection, is unique in the same degree.

Situating herself at the threshold of the delimited social area, and of the nation-state in particular, Weil draws attention to gaps in its margins. Through the gaps she reintroduces good as well as evil, help and harm, security and risk as matters of inquiry, judgment, and practice. She appoints herself liaison to the excluded. She invites insiders to exchange the ersatz freedom of an impregnable fortress for the indeterminate freedom of refuge: freedom to enter and depart, to take shelter and to take risks. She raises the

17 Ibid. p. 115.

18 “and with affection” I will address the importance of this element in the section on patriotism, below.


20 I return below to the question whether the two can be meaningfully distinguished.
questions “politics for what?”,”country for what?”,” and “nation-state for what?” To these banished questions she offers the following answer: to provide for “human souls.”21

The Human Soul

But what is this “human soul” Weil expects the collectivity to shelter? How might we judge among alternative, competing providers for the soul? With regard to politics, is the proper refuge for souls the nation, the state, the country - or some other entity entirely, such as the city, family, or church? To address such questions, I turn to the writings in which Weil considered humanity as such: “Human Personality,” “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations,” and The Need for Roots.

Each of these works participates in a broader dialogue among participants in the Resistance regarding the grounds for “human respect.” In the wake of the Third Republic’s collapse,22 it appeared urgently necessary to rethink and re-found the sorts of basic rights and liberties outlined in the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.” Groups like de Gaulle’s State Reform Commission and the scholarly General Studies Committee23 debated Constitutional plans, while new Declarations of Right featured prominently in Resistance journals and radio broadcasts. Although Weil considered these projects crucial to the legitimacy of any future French Republic,24 she


22 And five years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

23 An intellectual think tank formed by Resistance hero Jean Moulin.

24 She compares them to the salon culture of the 1789 Revolution, both as mechanisms of founding consent. Weil, “The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government.” pp. 90-92.
believed they put too much emphasis on merely *declaring* or *claiming* rights. Instead, she maintained that the “effective *exercise* of a right spring(s) not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being under a certain obligation towards him. *Recognition* of a right makes it effectual.”

By thus recasting individual rights as a matter of intersubjective recognition, Weil drew close to Personalism, the theologico-political school of thought associated with Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit*. The Personalists bemoaned the dichotomy between Liberalism’s rights-bearing “individual” and Communism’s history-bearing “class” or “collective.” They sought to transcend this dichotomy by taking the “whole person” as “sacred.” Although notoriously reluctant to define the “person”, they emphasized its role-based character and its place within a community, practically any community. Their roughly communitarian account appealed to Resistance leaders managing a shaky coalition that included Communists, Liberals, and Royalists.

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25 Weil did have some interactions with the Personalists. I mentioned in chapter 1 that Weil had asked Mounier to bring the Confederation of Christian Laborers (CFTC) into the CGT to counter-balance Soviet influence there. In 1937, Mounier apparently planned to have Weil examine industrial labor issues for *Esprit*, and in April of 1938 he published her letter on the Spanish Civil War. The German invasion and Weil’s exile interrupted these collaborations, and in 1940 Weil wrote to a friend whose anti-colonial article in *Esprit* she had just read, “I have myself been more or less in touch with the *Esprit* group, although I cannot call myself a contributor to the review, never having published anything there, to the best of my knowledge; but that is due to the chance circumstances of my being sick the two or three times that I had agreed to write something for it.” Weil, *Simone Weil on Colonialism*, p. 81.


27 Especially Resistance leaders Andre Philip (Weil’s immediate superior in London) and Henri Frenay.

28 Mounier’s attempts to transcend Right and Left led him through a strange political career, in which he and his journal supported a wide variety of positions: anarchism, fascism, the Left opposition to Hitler.
However, despite superficial commonalities, Weil rejected Personalism as a ground for rights. In “Human Personality” she takes the Personalists to task for confusing the social “person” with the “whole” of human being. Because the “person” refers specifically to social roles or public agency, Weil fears that regarding it as “sacred” will diminish other aspects of humanity, such as the body itself. “If it were the human personality…that was sacred to me,” she says, “I could easily put out (a man’s) eyes. As a blind man he would be exactly as much a human personality as before. I should not have touched the person in him at all. I should have destroyed nothing but his eyes.”

Against Mounier’s attempt to locate “the whole” in one aspect of humanity, Weil adopts a posture of radical openness to an encounter with the Other: “It is neither his person, nor the human personality inside him, which is sacred to me. It is he. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything.” While the Personalists’ “whole person” begs the question of what aspects bear on fundamental respect, Weil’s openness to “everything” allows for future revelations and unexpected discovery about the meaning and boundaries of the “human being.”

“Person,” she concludes, names only one part among many that make up the particular being before her. The social traits encompassed by the “person” do matter, but

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they occupy equal footing with other aspects, from the relatively apparent (the body’s “arms” and “eyes”) to the ultimately impenetrable (“thoughts”).

Although Weil resists reducing the “whole being” to any one observed or posited trait, she does undertake to distinguish some “sides” or aspects of humanity, most thoroughly in her analysis of the complex effects of suffering and affliction (malheur):

All the three sides of our being are always exposed... Our flesh is fragile; it can be pierced or torn or crushed... by any piece of matter in motion. Our soul is vulnerable... pitifully dependent upon all sorts of objects, inanimate and animate, which are themselves fragile and capricious. Our social personality, upon which our sense of existence almost depends, is always and entirely exposed to every hazard. These three parts of us are linked with the very centre of our being in such a way that it bleeds for any wound of the slightest consequence which they suffer.

Weil regards the several “sides” as analytically distinct but deeply interrelated in function and practice. She reveals her debt to Descartes when she distinguishes the physical “flesh” from the interior “soul,” but Weil’s “soul” surpasses the rationalistic “mind” by including thought as well as affect, desire, and “moral life.” As she develops it across her writings, “soul” draws interior life into closer relation with the body and with others. Moreover, when Weil says that the soul depends on “all sorts of objects,” she considers the body paramount among these, with prolonged or intense bodily suffering forming

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32 By Roots, Weil includes the attributes of person within the soul as well, suggesting a very close relationship between social and interior relations.

the primary threat to the soul’s integrity. Conversely, damage to the soul manifests itself in bodily symptoms and a loss of social interaction, “a state more or less resembling death, more or less akin to a purely vegetative existence.”34 Not dualism pivoting on Descartes’ singular pineal gland but complex, manifold interdependence characterizes the relationships among humanity’s “sides.”35

Weil’s focus on vulnerability points to a key trait of the three “sides” of humanity. All three - body, soul, and person – manifest themselves in the world, among other human beings, albeit by different means and to different degrees. They are mutable and conditional as well as vulnerable. Therefore, none can serve the role Mounier assigned to the person alone: that of a “sacred,” inviolable repository for universal, unconditional


Flat readings of “The Love of God and Affliction” and her Notebooks have given Weil a reputation for admiring martyrdom. Crucially, however, Weil distinguishes physical suffering from Malheur (the opposite of well-being, usually translated “affliction”). The former, as the experience of hardship, difficulty, and a lack of control can have positive effects on the soul, she thinks, while the latter, which resembles trauma and results from prolonged and intense suffering, does only damage. Among the harms malheur inflicts on its victims is to rob them of the capacity to renounce their own agency to divine mystery. “Malheur is something quite distinct from a method of God’s teaching.” (Waiting for God, 79) Even Weil’s mysticism affirms autonomy: the individual must “consent” to self-denial or “decreation.” Conquest and oppression, on the other hand, render subjects unable to give any kind of consent, mystical or political. “Every human being has at his roots here below a certain terrestrial poetry…Malheur is the tearing up of these roots. Human cities in particular…surround the life of their inhabitants with poetry…(T)o destroy cities, either materially or morally, or to exclude human beings from a city, this is to sever every bond of poetry and love between human beings and universe.” That is to say, refugees and conquered peoples do not “suffer” in a way that leads them naturally to compensatory spiritual growth. (Waiting, 116) “When misfortune bites too deeply, it creates a disposition toward misfortune, which makes people plunge headlong into it themselves, dragging others along with them. Germany is an example of this.” (Roots, 96-7)

35 In fairness to Descartes, this is probably less of a departure than unfriendly caricature would suggest. Indeed, Weil’s academic thesis on Descartes presents the dualist himself as a sort of proto-phenomenologist for whom mind and body are deeply intertwined. According to Weil, Descartes’ “mind” requires the mediation of the body to reconcile its two “imaginations”: its apprehension of itself as free and its experience of the world as limitation. Bodily movement in and interaction with the world, and physical labor in particular, reconcile the mind to the world and to itself. “Science and Perception in Descartes,” in Weil, Formative Writings, 1929-1941.
respect. If we want to motivate such respect for humanity, as did Weil and her co-conspirators, we must look elsewhere.

For her part, Weil looks to the “centre” that, in the passage quoted above, experiences vulnerability only indirectly, through its connections to the worldly “sides” of human being. She characterizes the “center” (or “bottom”) of humanity as a basic desire for or expectation of good. It is “something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to (it). It is this”, and not the person, “that is sacred in every human being.” Instead of the social person, or unique traits of the human body, or capacities for ratio, Weil finds a shared, human “essence” in the expectation of worldly or intermediate goods: help rather than harm, justice instead of violence, relief from suffering, shelter from cold, and food to ward off starvation. Among possible loci of universal respect, only this “profound and unchanging” expectation, Weil suggests, does not differ across humanity.

36 “Human Personality,” Weil, Simone Weil: An Anthology. p. 51. Indomitably, but not invulnerably: “when a man’s life is destroyed or damaged by some wound or privation of soul or body…it is not only his sensibility that suffers but also his aspiration towards the good.” (204). Indomitable means that “whenever a man cries inwardly; ‘why am I being hurt?’ harm is being done to him. He is often mistaken when he tries to define the harm, and why and by whom it is being inflicted on him. But the cry itself is infallible.” (73)

37 Weil rejects each of these in turn: “He is not sacred inasmuch as he happens to have long arms, blue eyes, or possibly commonplace thoughts. Nor as a duke…nor as a dustman…” Ibid. p. 51.

More recent candidates for the “essence” of humanity also fail Weil’s test: a particular gene sequence, a uniquely enlarged and sophisticated prefrontal cortex, or a common ancestor in “mitochondrial Eve” cannot tell me why I should not “put out his eyes.”

38 “Human Personality,” Ibid. pp. 51-52. In the “Draft,” Weil also characterizes the expectant center as “longing for an absolute good, a longing which is…never appeased by any object in this world.” There, unconditional respect for humanity finds its motive in the unknowable, unpredictable capacity for any and
A problem arises here: in identifying a “centre” of humanity and positing it as the locus of basic respect, Weil risks repeating the Personalists’ error: to mistake a part of humanity for the whole. This is precisely the error she meant to avoid by stepping to a non-critical distance and opening herself to “the arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything.” Why, after insisting on the irreducible complexity and potential for new revelation in the Other, does Weil go on to describe a human “centre” that, by virtue of its name alone, appears to take priority over peripheral “sides”? Were the Personalists mistaken when they isolated one aspect of humanity, as Weil seemed to suggest at first? Or does she think they merely chose the wrong part of humanity, a peripheral rather than a central trait, to elevate as “sacred”? Finally, on what basis does Weil claim that the expectation of good treatment does not differ across humanity? This claim seems especially dubious.

I maintain these two accounts are less contradictory than first appears. “Personality” and “Draft” represent complementary rather than opposed trajectories: the former ascends from the interpersonal world to the transcendence of the “impersonal”, the latter descends from “reality outside the world” to a decidedly worldly list of human obligations. In either case, the “center” of humanity involves expectation of the good, whether absolute or intermediate. Moreover, despite Weil’s general dislike of Aristotle (66), the “Draft” argues that transcendent good only descends to earth via acts that meet worldly needs of body and soul.

Constraints of time and space prevent me from developing a full account of Weil’s mysticism and its role in these texts. For now, I will defer (with caveats) to Mary Dietz’ judgment that Weil, even in her most mystical phases, situates herself “between the human and the divine.” I do want to offer two friendly amendments to Dietz’s reading: first, where Dietz views Weil’s late writings as “as a series of dramatic oscillations between a mystical renunciation of the world…and a political commitment to it,” I would characterize the oscillations as rather more “intentional” than “dramatic.” Secondly, where Dietz sees “renunciation” I see periodic “withdrawal” from the world as a condition and mode of engagement in it, a mystical analogue to Weil’s threshold politics. Dietz. p. 106.
Upon further examination, Weil’s immanent critique of Personalism provides a broader, parallel critique of the foundationalist approaches dominating rights discourse. An immanent critique, but not a hostile one: Weil signs on to the general project of fomenting unconditional respect for the human. But she points out that unconditional respect must be independent of conditions and therefore of facts. Personalism erred in its attempt to take an observable, worldly, manifest, and mutable characteristic as a basis for unconditional respect. In order to preserve unconditional respect for all aspects of humanity that appear in the world, Weil hides the “essence” of humanity elsewhere.\(^39\)

The center’s immutability depends on its unknowability. Unlike the “sides” (and the “social areas” through which they act and interact), the human center cannot appear directly in the world. It cannot be assessed or found lacking in particular cases. It is strictly unconditional. As such, it is also strictly unknowable. We cannot observe, verify, or disprove its existence. We can only behave as though it is there, through habits and practices of inter-subjective attention and respect.\(^40\)

Taking into account the center’s epistemological unavailability, Weil’s description of the human center becomes a declaration: “All human beings are absolutely identical in so far as they can be thought of as consisting of a centre, which is an unquenchable desire for good, surrounded by an accretion of psychical and bodily


\(^40\) This may explain why Weil gives particular names to the sides – “body, soul, and person” – but hesitates to name the center: it remains the centre, or the centre of the heart. Thus the “Draft” begins with this declaration: “There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside any sphere that is accessible to human faculties. Corresponding to this reality, at the centre of the human heart, is the longing for absolute good…” Weil, *Simone Weil: An Anthology.* pp. 201-202.
Despite her critique of rights-claiming, she returns to the form of the revolutionary declaration, negotiating its traditional ambivalence between “we hold these truths” and “all men are created equal.” While her peers tend to emphasize the objective “are created,” Weil charts a course much closer to intersubjective “holding.” In an attempt to reroute the Resistance’s search for the grounds of human respect, she suggests that the surest “foundation” or “ground” for unconditional, interpersonal human respect is, in actuality, neither foundation nor ground but presupposition and practice.

Subsequently, in *Roots*, she makes this shift explicit, proclaiming “an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being,” an obligation that “has no foundation” at all, neither in dictates of reason nor in “social structure…heritage…(or) convention.” It can at best be afforded “verification” by “common consent.” It is not discovered, proven, or established by philosophers, princes, or founders. It is only ever held in common, among and by those who dedicate themselves to its realization.

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42 Optimistically, Weil locates such “common consent” in “universal conscience” throughout and across human history. I would constrain “verification in common consent” to those rare moments in history when some group of persons learns and describes some part of what it means to exercise respect for the human. Weil gathers such moments into a tradition she portrays as continuous and unbroken. I regard the tradition as quite fragmented and fragile. Even so, I prefer Weil’s anti-foundationalism to grounding universal respect in observable traits.


Weil also says obligations are owed “towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned…not based on any…situation (or) convention…In our world, it is not founded on anything at all…(therefore)…not subject to any condition. (emphasis added).” The phrase “in our world” only implies the otherworldly reasoning she offers in “Draft”.

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The public practice of truth-holding brings the account back from the transcendent, unconditional, expectant “essence” of humanity to the visible, interpersonal world. Here is the legacy of Weil’s mysticism for her political writings:44 a double movement between this-worldly and other-worldly orientations, and a community that “holds these truths” and renders transcendent “realities” immanent. Having put the “center” or “essence” of humanity beyond human knowledge, she recognizes she has also put it beyond the direct exercise of respect. The intersubjective practice of respect must take place among the “sides” of humanity that are “exposed” within the world. The transcendent, expectant “center” or essence “can impose only one obligation: respect,”45 but respect in turn can only be exercised “indirectly” through “the needs in this world of the souls and bodies of human beings.”46

The Needs of the Soul

Weil’s treatise L’enracinement or The Need for Roots begins with the notion that the transcendent center of humanity “imposes only one obligation: (basic) respect,” which, she reiterates, “is only performed if the respect is effectively expressed in a real, not a fictitious way…this can only be done through the medium of man’s earthly needs.” These include the physical needs of the body, such as “protection against violence,

44 Discussed in Chapter 1, pages 53-55.


46 “Draft,” in Weil, Simone Weil: An Anthology. pp. 204-205. Also, “The obligation is only performed if the respect is expressed in a real, not a fictitious way; and this can only be done through the medium of Man’s earthly needs. Weil, The Need for Roots. p. 6.
housing, clothing, heating, hygiene and medical attention,” as well as the needs of the 
“soul.”

To be clear: Weil’s “soul” is not an eternal substance or a divine spark. It is also 
distinct from the transcendent center in that it numbers among those aspects of humanity 
that appear in the world. The soul’s needs, therefore, are decidedly “earthly…a necessary 
condition of our life on this earth. Which means to say that if they are not satisfied, we 
fall little by little into a state more or less resembling death…” (Roots 7). Weil cites 
deportation and slavery as “forms of cruelty which can injure a man’s life without 
injuring his body.” These almost invariably involve bodily harm, but a hypothetical slave 
or refugee in peak physical condition would be harmed purely by virtue of having lost his 
“liberty” or her “native land.” Therefore, “liberty” and “native land” offer prima facie 
examples of “needs of the soul” – earthly needs related to but distinguishable from purely 
physical needs.

Despite their earthly character, Weil considers the needs of the soul “much more 
difficult to recognize and to enumerate than are the needs of the body.” Therefore, she 
begin by enumerating some bodily needs in order to identify characteristics that 
distinguish truly “vital needs” from mere preferences or “desires, whims, fancies and


48 Although radical epistemological openness to the Other leaves open the possibility that these may figure 
in the complex constellation of human being.

49 Pays, not patrie. The distinction matters for Weil, as I argue below.

50 Weil, The Need for Roots. p. 7. That the emotional or psychological trauma of exile and enslavement 
will always manifest somehow in physical symptoms challenges even this attempt to distinguish soul from 
acters”. Firstly, vital needs are general in character: “Man requires, not rice or potatoes, but food; not wood or coal, but heating.” Second, vital needs are limited (a principle hearkening back to her critique of unlimited national interest): “A miser never has enough gold, but the time comes when any man provided with an unlimited supply of bread finds he has had enough. Food brings satiety.” Finally, because they are limited, vital needs function in “antithetical pairs … combine(d) together to form a balance”.

“Man requires food, but also an interval between meals; he requires warmth and coolness; rest and exercise”.\(^{51,52}\) From rest and work to inhalation and exhalation, human life fundamentally requires oscillation between limited and opposed but complementary and equally necessary goods.\(^{53}\)

With these traits in mind, Weil proceeds to enumerate the needs of the soul. Her list combines principles from both revolutionary and conservative traditions, pairing the trio Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (the last she terms “Social Life”) with countervailing

\(^{51}\) Weil, The Need for Roots. pp. 7, 9, 12.

\(^{52}\) Roots implies that the needs of the body and of the soul are similarly arranged in antithetical pairs, while the “Draft” suggests that this arrangement only applies to the needs of the soul.

\(^{53}\) Thus, Weil’s migratory practices, from the political threshold position to interworldly mysticism, find an analog in the most mundane, everyday transitions. Like transactions at material and metaphorical thresholds, the transitions from rest to exercise and back are constrained by inherited structures (including the biological traits and requirements of the body) that can be either reinforced or modified by habituation. Habituation, in turn, admits recurring but intermittent moments of judgment that may either reinforce or undermine inherent biological, social, or institutional designs. The potential resonances of the threshold go deep, perhaps to a threshold ontology. In any case, Weil’s analogies to food and sleep may remind political theorists that it is not enough to identify a solitary good – whether “rest,” “food,” “citizenship,” “care,” “prudence,” or “martial spirit” - and then develop a praxis around that good without carefully considering the conditions under which human individuals or communities may require the opposite. Even flexibility, prudence, and moderation – much as they seem fitted to this view - may need to be paired with firmness, risk-taking, and excess (what, after all, is flexibility without a fixed point against which to flex? How might Machiavellians incorporate Weil’s “satiety” into their virtues of flexibility, realism, and princely virtu?)

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values from the *Ancien Regime*: Obedience, Hierarchy, and Privacy. To these she adds categories of especial relevance to the political urgencies confronting the Free French: the pair “Private Property and Collective Property” addresses debates between liberals and socialists. “Security and Risk” refers to the choices and temptations faced by a polity in extreme peril. “Freedom of Opinion” appears in tension with “Truth,” as Weil attempts to parse public speech from manipulative suggestion. Each antithetical pair forms a “balance” – not a balance “struck” between contradictory forces but a reciprocal dynamic between mutually enabling factors that “have to combine” so that each may serve its unique purpose.

Of these pairs, the duo Security and Risk is particularly important to Weil’s understanding of politics. She defines Security as a condition in which “the soul is not

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54 In the “Draft”, she adds a qualifying adjective: “consented obedience”.

55 In *Roots* she opposes Equality to both Inequality and Hierarchy. Inequality seems to me a less rigid and therefore better antithesis to Equality than Hierarchy, but Weil insists that humans need hierarchy understood as symbolic pedagogy. The superiors in a “legitimate” hierarchy would recognize that they enjoy their status for purely “symbolic” reasons, she claims (*Roots*, 19). Weil does occasionally take up the defense of Constitutional monarchy, although she could also have Church hierarchy in mind.

56 The pair “Social Life and Privacy” (or “Solitude”) appears only in the “Draft”, unfortunately with no exposition. In *Roots*, Privacy is implied less strongly through the pair “Private Property and Collective Property,” while Social Life seems to have been subsumed by “Enrootedness,” discussed below.

57 With little success, in my view. Her specific policy proposals on speech appear downright draconian, although her basic point – that freedom of speech belongs to real persons and citizens before fictitious persons like corporations, parties, and media outlets – bears repeating in the wake of *Citizens United*.


59 Weil rejects the “golden mean”, which in her view “consists in satisfying neither the one nor the other of two contrary needs” in a “caricature of the genuinely balanced state in which contrary needs are each fully satisfied in turn.” Weil, *The Need for Roots*. p. 12.

under the weight of fear or terror, except as the result of an accidental conjunction of circumstances and for brief and exceptional periods.” The fear and terror that undermine security are more “permanent states” caused by prolonged exposure to such dangers as “threat of unemployment, police persecution, the presence of a foreign conqueror, the probability of invasion, or any other calamity which seems too much for human strength to bear.” (33) Understood this way, Security includes impermanent or momentary fear and episodic interruptions of the norm. Such a definition leaves space for Risk, another “essential need of the soul”:

Risk is a form of danger which provokes a deliberate reaction; that is to say, it doesn’t go beyond the soul’s resources to the point of crushing the soul beneath a load of fear... The protection of mankind from fear and terror doesn’t imply the abolition of risk; it implies on the contrary, the permanent presence of a certain amount of risk in all aspects of social life; for the absence of risk weakens courage to the point of leaving the soul, if the need should arise, without the slightest inner protection against fear.62

Security understood in this way rules out a national security culture (for Weil, the imperial doctrine; for us, the war on terror) that treats every conceivable or imagined danger as a threat to security as such. According to Weil, a definition of security that excludes danger or risk completely only leaves its subjects more vulnerable to the experience of paralyzing terror, if not to the tactics deployed by terror’s purveyors. By contrast, she maintains that periodic exposure to limited dangers or hazards can contribute to the cultivation of capacities for intentional response.6364

61 Compare the traumatized stonliness of the disarmed in “The Poem of Force.”


63 “The State’s most obvious duty is to keep efficient watch at all times over the security of the national territory. Security doesn’t mean absence of danger... it means a reasonable chance of being able to weather
It is crucial to remember that the “balance” between Security and Risk, or between any other pair of mutual goods, must be achieved in dynamic practice rather than struck by an overarching authority. Exposure to danger should be limited, but the appropriate limits cannot be determined ahead of time and then imposed. They must be continually discovered in practice, leaving an ineliminable chance that Risk will become danger, that persons’ capacity to respond to danger may be overwhelmed. The good of Risk requires that these dangers be … risked! The greater danger, in Weil’s view, is to eliminate the good of Risk while attempting to finally eliminate danger. Eliminating Risk permanently institutes the danger of crushing, paralyzing fear.

Thus, although Weil conceptually reconciles apparently opposed needs and goods, she recognizes that actual, mutable circumstances introduce “confusion and incompatibility” in their fulfillment. This observation occasions her description of a need with no corresponding opposite: the need for “Order.” Recalling her discussion in “Guerre,” where she described “order” as an “unstable equilibrium” among competing any storms which should arise. But that is only the State’s most elementary duty…if that is all it does, it cannot succeed even in doing that.” Ibid. p. 163.

64 Weil’s characterization of Security and Risk recalls her description of the need of the “person” to have “enough” solitude, silence, and shelter to act intentionally. “Personality,” Weil, Simone Weil: An Anthology. p. 59.

65 Like the ineliminable but manageable chance that struggle, which characterizes progressive order, might devolve into war, this is a danger that Weil thinks we must countenance. See Chapter 1, pages 32-38.

66 Weil actually begins the list of needs in Roots with Order, but since recognizing Order requires understanding obligations, and this in turn requires identifying basic human needs have been identified, Order seems to name a proportionate arrangement of needs to obligations rather than a stand-alone need as such. I find it easier to conceive at the end of the list.
forces, Weil now defines Order as “a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones.” This definition rules out arrangements that purchase stability by requiring some parties to routinely sacrifice their own needs and obligations to those of others. “Whoever acts in such a way as to increase this incompatibility (of needs and corresponding obligations) is a trouble-maker. Whoever acts in such a way as to diminish it is an agent of order.”

Weil’s agents of order might appear as conservators of “stability” (like the conservative actors in “Guerre” who assume a “duty to defend order”) but can just as easily be advocates for change. They could come from any quarter: they may be statesmen or citizens, princes or people, bureaucrats or rabble-rousers. But no matter which parties take up the cause of Order understood in this way, they cannot obtain order by sacrificing others to their own prerogatives. The most serious violation of Order, for Weil, is to “simplify problems” by “den(ying) the existence of certain obligations” – a powerful temptation for any would-be agent of order. Like balance, Order does not admit

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67 See Chapter 1, pp. 37-38.
68 In “The Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression,” Weil attributes to the Romans, Dante, Balzac, and the French Right the notion of “order” as stable inequality, a “balance between those who command and those who obey” struck by so-called “upholders of order.” She argues that “this stability of power – objective of those who call themselves realists – shows itself to be a chimera, if one examines it closely” because “the instruments of power – arms, gold, machines, magical or technical secrets – always exist independently of him who disposes of them, and can be taken up by others. Consequently, all power is unstable,” and all relationships between rulers and ruled “constitute an irremediable disequilibrium which is continually aggravating itself.” In Roots, Weil maintains her rejection of “stability,” but no longer considers “disequilibrium” necessarily “aggravating.” Weil, Oppression and Liberty. pp. 63-64.
69 Weil calls it a “crime” to sacrifice one obligation to another, except when structural conditions “force” a sacrifice by rendering two obligations incompatible in fact. Even then, “a crime is committed if the obligation so sacrificed is not merely sacrificed in fact, but its existence denied.” Weil, The Need for Roots. pp. 4-5.

Moreover, ever-vigilant to the danger of self-deception that assuages guilt and flees responsibility, Weil cautions: “We cannot even be sure that the idea of an order in which all obligations would be compatible
establishment or imposition according to a known set of rules: “we possess no method for diminishing (the) incompatibility” among obligations, although we must attempt to do so. Instead, we must all feel our way as we go along.

Weil’s description of Order as a “texture of social relationships” enabling the fulfillment of manifold obligations invokes the need for political community, for action in concert to create or sustain these conditions. Weil addresses this crucial need, which occupies her attention for the rest of the treatise that bears its name, under the name of *l’enracinement* or “enrootedness”.

**Enrootedness**

Weil regards Enrootedness, like Order, as one of the most important needs of the soul. Together, Order (according to her conception) and Roots provide the conditions for other needs to be fulfilled. Also like Order, and unlike the other vital needs, Weil introduces Enrootedness without a named complementary antithesis. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that Enrootedness represents a monolithic good. Just as Order stands alone because it describes *relations* among mutually enabling needs, Weil opposes Root to Root (and Roots to Roots) in mutually supporting, dynamic tension.

with one another isn’t itself a fiction.” Nevertheless, she advises keeping this high standard in view as a source of hope for “agents of order.” Weil, *The Need for Roots*. pp. 10-12.


71 That Weil finishes the list of antithetically paired needs with one that opposes itself recalls the structure of “Guerre,” in which the study of false dichotomies culminated with the opposition of “nation” to “nation.” But while “Guerre” unmasked destructive dichotomies, the opposition of like to like in *Roots* results in productive tension, replacing the clash of nations with the intertwining of roots.
To be “rooted,” according to Weil, is to have “real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future.”72 The definition is normative – it goes beyond the idea of the mere “collectivity” that appears at the beginning of *Roots* (discussed at the beginning of this chapter). There, Weil described mere “collectivities” as providers of “food” to a “given number” of human beings. “Food” served as a general name for physical needs as well as an analogy for the needs of the soul, of psychic, moral, and social life. Collectivities deserve respect and support to the degree that they feed constituent souls, and invite opposition when they become rather more destructive than nurturing.73 Beyond the good of collectivity, enrooting community provides two crucial, interrelated goods associated not only with life but with specifically political life: continuity in time and opportunities for active participation.

The latter element in particular distinguishes “Enrootedness” from other “organic” conceptions of the community. Weil qualifies participation as “real” and “active.” Enrooting community does not render persons passive recipients of an orienting tradition, or render them agents only insofar as they “pass on” an immutable heritage. Weil’s “treasures of the past” take a “living shape” as they are worked and reworked by their inheritors. Meanwhile, “real” participation rules out mythical

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72 Weil, *The Need for Roots*. p. 43. In “Draft”, Weil offers some examples: “a man’s country, and places where his language is spoken, and places with a cultural or a historical past which he shares, and his professional milieu, and his neighborhood.” (“Draft,” 210.)

73 Therefore, a collectivity could conceivably provide enough “food” in the form of other goods – such as Security and Risk, Private Property and Collectivity Property – to merit some degree of respect and attention even if it failed to provide Roots.
narratives that substitute tacit, long-since-past participatory moments for ongoing actions, recognized and felt as such. Healthy enrooting communities enable their constituents to contribute to the preservation and development of roots over time.  

Lest Enrooting community become one more “delimited social area,” she specifies that every “human being needs to have multiple roots” that interact, overlap, and conflict with one another. Together, these produce an “environment of which he forms a natural part.” These multi-root environments themselves should cross-cut and intersect like the roots of which they are composed, for “(r)eciprocal exchanges by which different sorts of environment exert influence on one another are no less vital than Enrootedness” itself. Slightly different wording in the “Draft” adds a further layer of complexity to this picture. There, Weil says “the human soul needs above all to be rooted in several natural environments,” describing as roots the environments that, in The Need for Roots, are composed of roots. Combining these two texts, “enrootedness” serves as a general name for participation on multiple levels, yielding a complex, unpredictable federalism of Enrootedness. Weil’s “a community,” closely examined, reveals diverse, interrelated,


75 Ibid. p. 44. Emphasis added.

76 Where I have “enrootedness” for l’enracinement, the original translation has “to be rooted”.

77 See also “Three Letters on History,” where Weil describes “a living intercourse between diverse and mutually independent centers” that constitutes “the living warmth of a human environment…” Weil, *Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943*. p. 79.

and competing “communities” in the plural. Roots themselves supply the complementary antithesis to Roots. 79

Nevertheless, Weil’s repeated appeals to “natural” participation and membership may undermine her efforts to pluralize roots. She qualifies the natural somewhat when she says, “this participation is a natural one in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession, and social surroundings.” The conditions she lists range from intentional to circumstantial. Profession and place certainly involve both decision and accident, while “conditions of birth” only appear “automatic” from the perspective of the individual, not of the family or of the community into which the individual is born. Nature therefore appears, despite Weil’s invocation of the “automatic,” to include conditions given and accepted as well as chosen. The common thread in all of these conditions is that none are felt as coercive impositions. 80

Weil explicitly rules out imposition when she insists that each environment, although composed of multiple “roots” it shares with other environments,

should not receive an outside influence as something additional to itself but as a stimulant intensifying its own particular way of life. It should draw nourishment from outside contributions only after having digested

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79 Weil’s enrooting environments thus occupy a place between Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome (which she partially anticipates) and the linear “root” to which the rhizome was opposed, underscoring her role as theorist of refuge rather than nomadologist.

80 Weil, The Need for Roots. p. 44. Weil assumes an experiential difference between coercive constraint and pedagogical constraint. Parents teaching their children how to speak in their native tongue do not necessarily coerce their children although they do constrain them in teaching the rules of communication. By contrast, Parisian and colonial schoolteachers coerce schoolchildren when they impose standard French and shame those who persist in speaking patois or local languages.
them, and the human beings who compose it should receive such contributions only from its hands.\textsuperscript{81}

This implies some powerful limits to cross-cultural receptivity, despite explicit multiculturalism in \textit{Roots} and elsewhere in Weil’s writings. Indeed, her critique of nationalism often seems to recapitulate the essentialism of “national character” studies, as when she worries that India will abandon its “living tradition” if it undertakes to become a “nation according to the modern Western type.” More troubling still, her belief that “whoever is uprooted himself uproots others” causes her to fear the post-war influence of the “American continent” where the “population has for several centuries been founded above all on immigration.”\textsuperscript{82}

Crucially, however, when Weil invokes the “natural” she means to oppose conquest and imperial dominion, not to defend an unsullied cultural heritage. Calling for “natural participation” in each of the “various communities throughout the world,” she situates that call within the contexts of global colonialism and European war:

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. pp. 43-44.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. pp. 47, 50.

Weil’s concerns about immigration have to do with its effects on immigrants as much as their adopted home. Elsewhere, she worries that people “in the position of immigrants” come “in contact above all with the repressive side of the state” and “for generations (find) themselves on the border line of those social categories which provide fair game for the police” (a problem Jane Addams noted in her work with immigrants from Russia). The insecurity of their position often renders immigrants vulnerable to the temptation to identify with a “huge, powerful, sovereign State” allowing them to imagine themselves as “undisputed masters in (their) own pays.” (\textit{Roots}, 151) She has the Soviet Union in mind, but the description could apply as well to the fervor with which some immigrants to the United States embrace their new polity (and enforce its prejudices against new and prospective arrivals). Given that “insecurity” of position lies underneath these effects, the appropriate response to her concerns would be not to marginalize immigrants even further, thereby rendering their situation even more uncertain, but to take measures ensuring that immigrants (including the authorized) do not remain more subject than their neighbors to the “repressive side of the state.” Still, Weil is insufficiently attentive to the potential harm she does by stirring fears about a nation of immigrants and by locating the problem in their psyches rather than in policy. See Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," \textit{Cultural Anthropology} 7, no. 1 (1992).
Uprootedness occurs whenever there is a military conquest…It reaches its most acute stage when there are deportations on a massive scale, as in Europe under the German occupation, or along the upper loop of the Niger, or where there is any brutal suppression of all local traditions, as in the French possessions in the Pacific…Even without a military conquest, money-power and economic domination can so impose a foreign influence as actually to provoke this disease of uprootedness.  

Through a matter-of-fact equivalence between French imperialism and German aggression, Weil reveals the twin foci of her concern. She opposes the natural and “automatic” not to the new and intentional but to coerced, imposed, violent assimilations. These include the colonial insistence that Annamite schoolchildren identify with “our forefathers, the Gauls” as well as Hitler’s pan-German and expansionist aims. Even when, at her most apparently conservative, Weil calls for the recovery, strengthening, and preservation of roots, she insists that she “doesn’t mean they should be fenced in. On the contrary, never was plenty of fresh air more indispensable. Rooting in and the multiplying of contacts are complementary to one another…if necessary on an international scale.”

The troubled history of nationalisms Westphalian, postcolonial, and otherwise may raise concerns about Weil’s appeal to “natural participation,” even if she does so in opposition to imperial dominion. We may have good reason to look for other language to address her concerns. We especially should ask why she feared a “nation of immigrants”

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83 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 44.

84 See Ibid. p. 51: “Love of the past has nothing to do with any reactionary political attitude. Like all human activities, revolution draws all its vigor from a tradition.”

85 Ibid. p. 52.
while calling for immediate, full citizenship for all of France’s colonial subjects. Despite these concerns, the animus behind her appeal to nature seems well-founded. In 1943, Weil had primarily encountered cosmopolitanism and internationalism in the institutional forms of French imperialism and Soviet dominion, and she sought a means to distinguish cross-cutting enrooting community’s “multiplying of contacts” from forced membership or demanded assimilation, the conqueror’s perversions of inclusivity. More importantly, she chose active, multifarious “participation” as a key element distinguishing enrooting *milieux* from ascriptive or assimilationist schemes. For Weil, liberated and refounded France must encourage participation not only in national life but in provincial, regional, European, and global life as well. Against patriotic talk of “eternal France” or invocations of the “global proletariat” she conceives enrooting community as pluralistic and cross-cutting. Against essentialist visions of *nation* and class, she defines Roots as a matter of “active” participation over time.

It is perhaps surprising then that Weil’s direct target in the subsequent pages of *Roots* is neither imperialism nor international Communism but Ernest Renan’s seminal lecture “What is a Nation?”, which is widely regarded as a case for the nation on participatory grounds. Despite Renan’s reputation for offering a more or less benign account of the nation, Weil attributed France’s patriotic mistakes in large part to his influence. It was therefore his account she had to wrestle with as she sought to transform France from a bearer of national glory into “root-fixing” ground.
What is a *Patrie*?

Weil regards conquest as the primary cause of uprootedness. However, when she turns to the case of conquered France, matters appear more complex. Widespread capitulation, collaboration, and even identification with the conquerors suggest that, in this case at least, the conquered were largely uprooted before the invading army arrived.86 To her colleagues in the Free French the problem seemed straightforward enough: France had suffered from a paucity of patriotic sentiment. The Great War’s devastation had produced an exaggerated aversion to military endeavors. They welcomed the resurgence of patriotic feeling among resisters and exiled French. Knee-jerk pacifism could finally give way to a salutary martial spirit and a restored sense of national grandeur.

Weil admitted that certain varieties of anti-war sentiment had contributed to the problem. She noted with dismay that Vichy’s earliest and strongest supporters included pacifists and internationalists with whom she had formerly found common cause.87 However, Weil saw more complex phenomena at work than greater or lesser degrees of patriotism. She reminded her associates that some of the earliest organized resistance to the Nazis had come not from hyper-patriots but from Marxists citing commitment to the global proletariat.88 Moreover, many of Vichy’s defenders (including her friend, the

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86 Although I go straight to Weil’s analysis and critique of France the Nation-State, Weil only gets there after first addressing the conditions of the French working class and peasantry. By foregrounding these issues, she accomplishes two important tasks. First, she emphasizes that the nation-state is only one among many “roots”. Second, she calls attention to sources of uprootedness other than military conquest, including economic, social, and educational matters. In the midst of war, Weil continues to think about forces that preceded and will endure beyond military conflict.


88 Ibid. p. 102. These same Marxists, Weil notes, did take up patriotic themes when they found it strategically useful. She also observes that the avowed internationalism of the Marxist working class
theologian Gustav Thibon, as well as many of the recent converts to deGaulle’s movement) had sought a reasonable chance of survival for French national identity—certainly a patriotic motive on its face. Finally, just before the invasion of Paris, Weil had often heard people speak of national glory and France’s “natural place” among the victors. She observed that many citizens who had “found it perfectly natural to talk about ‘collaboration’ to the oppressed natives of the French colonies went on making use of this word without any trouble in talking with their German masters.” In short, simply stoking the fires of patriotism could yield any number of outcomes depending on one’s conception of patriotism’s object.

For Weil, therefore, the problem was not in the degree but the characteristics of patriotism as hitherto understood. The traditional understanding—bound up with historic grandeur, military dominance, and colonial expansion—had not prevented the French people from “open(ing) their hands and allow(ing) their patrie to fall to the ground.” Instead, Weil argued that the patriotism of pride had gravitated toward ascendant Germany and away from vulnerable (and then defeated) France. If anything, the


89 Weil, The Need for Roots. pp. 113,136. Also: “Men cannot imagine themselves being the victims of wrongs which they find it quite natural to inflict upon others. But when that, in fact, happens, to their own horror, they find it to be quite natural; in their hearts they can find nothing to produce the necessary indignation and resistance against a form of treatment which they themselves have never been reluctant to inflict…” (271)

90 Ibid. p. 100.

91 Even among the Resistance, Weil complains of “those young Frenchmen who say that they support General de Gaulle for the same reasons that would make them support Hitler if they were Germans.” These misguided youths seem a bizarre parody or deformation of cosmopolitanism, with nomadic imaginations wedded to essentialist national identities, with bad “reasons” in either case. Weil, Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943. p. 201.
characteristics of French patriotism had enabled capitulation to and collaboration with the conqueror.

Yet, despite her hesitations toward patriotism as she found it, Weil felt she could not address the loss and redevelopment of Roots without “considering the notion of the patrie,” the object of patriotisme. This word92 was essentially new to her vocabulary.93 In previous works, from “Reflections on War” to “Guerre”, Weil had taken the nation as her primary category, calling for a redefinition of “national interest”, “national defense,” and the “nation” as such. In the Resistance writings, she changes tactics, arguing that

92 For English-speaking readers, translation issues have almost wholly obscured the distinct character of the patrie in Weil’s thinking, thus recapitulating for us the very problem Weil encountered in her own national discourse. I have taken pains to compare the English translation side-by-side with the French original, noting occurrences of each term. I found that where Weil uses nation, patrie, and pays as distinct terms for distinct although related phenomena, the translator essentially regards all three as synonyms, rendering patrie either “nation,” “country,” or even “patriotism” with no discernable pattern.

The error is somewhat understandable: while the French nation corresponds to the English “nation” and pays to “country,” patrie has no straightforward equivalent in our language, despite our transliterative adoption of the French patriote (“Patriotism,” describing the sentiment of a patriote, seems to have been coined in England then introduced to French). We commonly define patriotism as “love of country.” Among political philosophers, patriotism is sometimes defended from its critics as commitment or sentimental attachment to the Constitutional traditions of a sovereign people or “nation”. But (for reasons I discuss below) Weil rejects both pays and nation as names for the proper object of patriotism. Weil’s patriotisme for the patrie is therefore love of something for which we have no good name.

A brief etymological sketch sheds further light on the problem. Patrie ultimately derives from the Greek “pater” or “patros” meaning “father,” but it does so via several other terms the Greeks themselves derived from “pater.” The Greek “patria,” “patris” and “patriots” each expand and abstract the concept of fatherhood to refer to lineage, heritage, home, and native land. “Fatherland” or “homeland” therefore seem good candidates for patrie, and are frequently used as translations, but each has significant problems.

Although “fatherland” provides an almost literal equivalent and preserves the gendered character of patrie, after World War II it inevitably conjures up images of Hitler, a potentially obfuscating association in this case. “Homeland” introduces similar difficulties, as pointed out by Peggy Noonan and other critics of the U.S. government’s use of the term since 2001. More problematic than the historical connotations of these words, however, is the suffix “-land” in each case. Fatherland and homeland both suggest a closer connection to territory than does the French patrie, especially in Weil’s usage. Weil explicitly dissociates the patrie from land. When she refers directly to territory, region, or the population within a certain space, she always uses pays – never patrie.

93 With the exception of a few satirical references, for example “Those Throbbing Limbs of the Fatherland (patrie)” in Weil, Simone Weil on Colonialism.
France’s defeat represents the loss of a more general phenomenon, something including the \textit{nation} but ultimately distinguishable from it.\footnote{Biographers often point to Weil’s admission in her London notebooks that she had been guilty of “criminal negligence toward my \textit{patrie},” taking the \textit{mea culpa} as evidence of a turning point or retraction of her concerns about the nation-state. However, situating her notebooks in the context of her written work for the Resistance paints a somewhat different picture. Invoking the \textit{patrie} instead of the \textit{nation}, Weil signals another possible object of the name “France,” one less tied to historical grandeur and military prerogatives. Simone Weil, \textit{Simone Weil: First and Last Notebooks}, trans., Richard Rees (Oxford University Press, 1970). p. 346. (Rees has “country” for \textit{patrie}.)} As the referent of \textit{patriotisme}, \textit{patrie} seems a likely alternative to \textit{nation}, but it “has never been considered” carefully or “made the subject of any investigation.” \textit{Patrie} and \textit{patriotisme} alike are highly ambiguous - “floating signifiers” in the language of a later generation of intellectuals - at once dangerous and promising. Weil takes \textit{patrie}’s ambiguity as an opportunity to describe it “for the first time.” In giving the \textit{patrie} a more determinative shape, she attempts to shape the Resistance itself; to transform it from a movement for restored national prestige into a multifarious struggle for the conditions of justice in national and non-national contexts alike.\footnote{Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. pp. 102-103.}

Weil attributes much of the confusion surrounding the \textit{patrie} to Ernest Renan’s lecture “What is a Nation?” – as she calls it, a “mediocre page of Renan’s.”\footnote{“It is unpardonable that a word (\textit{patrie}) which nowadays is almost always to be found couple with the word country should hardly ever have been made the subject of any investigation. As a rule, all people can find to quote in connexion with it is a mediocre page of Renan’s.” Ibid. p. 103.} Her judgment may sound overly harsh. Scholars of nationalism and nationality still cite Renan as a major source of the “civic” as opposed to “ethnic” (or “French” as opposed to “German”) conception of the \textit{nation}. His description of the \textit{nation} as a product of
consent has provided one of the most important means to differentiate liberal, revolutionary patriotism from ethnic or linguistic nationalisms.

Insofar as Renan opposed racial and linguistic theories of national sovereignty, Weil has no complaints.\textsuperscript{97} Her critical assessment concerns rather his attempt to install a sovereign, unitary \textit{nation} as the sole possible object of the “sentiment we call \textit{patriotisme}.” By equating \textit{patrie} to \textit{nation}, Renan denies the possibility of similarly powerful commitment to non-, sub-, and extra-national communities. Moreover, although he recognizes historical processes of conquest and exclusion in the genesis of the modern \textit{nation}, he prescribes public forgetfulness of these facts so that the \textit{nation} can be narrated as a product of will alone - with terrible consequences for historically marginalized populations. For Weil, refashioning the \textit{nation} and parsing out the \textit{patrie} both require that she respond directly to Renan. She mentions him by name only once, but her engagement with him is clear. In the pages that follow she repeatedly takes up his premises and applies them to quite different effect.\textsuperscript{98}

She begins with the anthropology of ancient peoples that opens “What is a Nation?” Here and throughout his lecture, Renan slips among the \textit{nation}, the \textit{patrie}, and the \textit{État} so that the terms become nearly interchangeable. He tells his audience that ancient Assyria was not a \textit{nation} because it had no patriots. He argues that the Gallic and Spanish tribes who resisted Roman conquest cannot be regarded as forerunners of

\textsuperscript{97} In fact, Weil leans on Renan significantly in the several pages she dedicates to his \textit{nation}: characteristically, she offers an immanent critique rather than a rebuttal, accepting many of his premises but few of his conclusions.

\textsuperscript{98} To my knowledge, no other scholar has recognized Weil’s deep engagement with Renan in this passage of \textit{Roots}, which holds fascinating implications for scholars of nationalism and the “civic nation.”
modern patriotism because they lacked “central institutions.” Renan does recognize a form of “patriotisme” in the public-spiritedness of certain pre-national peoples—predictably, those regarded as forerunners of the modern nation-state: ancient Athens, Rome, and Sparta.” Still, even in these exceptional cases, he thinks that too great or too small extent of territory hinders patriotic attachment and disqualifies the polity in question from nationhood. Even Rome was only “nearly a patrie.”

Weil accepts Renan’s premise that the “nation is a recent innovation,” but she objects strongly to his deployment of patriotisme and patrie in support of that claim. Addressing a loose, internally divided coalition of Resistance networks, she points out that participants in the ancient resistance to Rome declared loyalty to “Gaul” and to “Spain” despite lacking centralized states corresponding to those labels. If patriotism’s conventional meanings include dedication to and sacrifice for a larger community, then “(t)he sentiment we call patriotisme certainly existed” among at least some ancient peoples, “only its object was not set within territorial limits.” For Weil, commitment to “the common” and “the public good” is not confined to one institutional form, as Renan admits of Greek city-states and the Roman Empire. Only in “recent times,” Weil maintains, has “some definite, circumscribed thing,” the modern nation, been “permanently installed as an object of patriotic devotion.” She encourages her co-resisters to find inspiration in the examples of ancient peoples for whom “(p)atriotism

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100 Tellingly, Renan locates the seeds of modern patriotism in Rome, but flatly denies patriotic motives to those who resisted Rome. Weil attributes patriotism of a sort to both, but laments that France has, for the most part, adopted the Roman model.
was something diffuse, nomadic, which expanded or contracted according to degrees of similarity and common danger,” something “mixed up with different kinds of loyalty…something very complicated, but also very human.” Where Renan sees only strategic opportunism in tribal resistance to Roman rule, Weil sees a potential model for the Free French coalition - still a nascent, diplomatically unrecognized government-in-exile confronting serious contention between Generals deGaulle and Giraud for leadership, not to mention increasing anti-Parisian sentiment in the provinces, and a military force consisting largely of North African colonial conscripts.\(^\text{101}\)

In taking ancient tribal resisters rather than Roman empire as a model for French patriotism, Weil turns Renan on his head. According to Renan, Rome’s conquest of resistant tribes “brought about the great benefit of putting an end to war.” This \textit{pax romana} prefigures an even more perfect “fusion” of France by the conquests of its legendary kings.\(^\text{102}\) Unity, achieved by any means, is essential to both \textit{patrie} and \textit{nation}. He readily admits that France’s unity can be traced to historical “deeds of violence” and “means of brutality” from the Albigensian Crusade to Richelieu’s sieges. But violence and conquest attend “the origin of all political formations,” and in France, he judges, the “consequences have been altogether beneficial.”\(^\text{103}\) Historical results compensate for past


\(^{102}\) Eugen Weber explains that pre-Revolutionary patriotism identified with Rome, while post-Revolutionary patriots tended to elevate the Gauls and other victims of Roman conquest. From this perspective, Renan is pitting Roman universalism against ethnic tribalism. Weil, by contrast, thinks French patriotism still hearkens back to Rome in its form and mode, and she looks for alternatives beyond both tribal atavism and Roman universalism through Imperio. Eugen Weber, \textit{The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s} (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994).

\(^{103}\) Renan does argue that conquest is not absolutely necessary for every \textit{nation}, and that some, unlike France, can come into being through will alone: for example Switzerland and the United States. However,
injustices. In a limited sense, therefore, Renan does recognize an admixture of good and evil in the genesis of the nation, as Weil would require of him.\textsuperscript{104}

However, the “beneficial” legacy of national consolidation is fragile. “Too searching a scrutiny” into historical contingencies and crimes can undo conquest’s positive effects. Renan therefore enjoins his countrymen to collectively, selectively forget:

\begin{quote}
Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality…(T)he essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common; and also that they have forgotten many things…(E)very French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

Forgetfulness accomplishes what even kings could not: the transformation of the historical nation, a product of “convergent facts” and “profound complications of history,” into a “spiritual principle.” It forges “commonness” and shared life out of diverse, even conflicting memories and experiences.\textsuperscript{106}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid. pp. 9-11.
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\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. p. 11. Massacres in the “Midi” refers to the conquest of Southern France in the Albigensian Crusade, Weil’s favorite example of cruel conquest memorialized as beneficent nationalism.
\end{flushright}

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\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. pp. 11-12, 18-19.
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As Benedict Anderson observes, there is something odd about Renan’s injunction to forget: he names the very things he says a citizen has to have forgotten. Either Renan is being ironic (a possibility Anderson eventually rejects) or his “forgetting” amounts to something other than a simple loss of memory, different from Orwell’s “memory hole” or the systematic denial Arendt attributes to totalitarianism.\(^{107}\) Renan’s forgetfulness is not erasure but self-forgiveness, a tacit agreement among citizens to regard only the good consequences of their collective history as relevant to contemporary political life – or even further to regard every actual outcome as good.\(^{108}\) Renan and his citizens acknowledge historical massacre and conquest only on the condition that they already regard such events as irrelevant.\(^{109}\)

Once again, Weil takes up Renan’s premises and draws opposing conclusions. She agrees that, in its origins, “national unity had been brought about almost exclusively by the most brutal conquests.” However, she takes serious issue with his notion that conquest can be regarded as “altogether beneficial”\(^{110}\) and contests his assignation of

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\(^{109}\) By contrast, one of the few communities that offered meaningful resistance to Vichy’s collaboration with the Nazis was deeply committed to the memory of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. This community was Le Chambon, a largely Huguenot community. Residents of the village drew a direct parallel between the treatment their ancestors’ treatment by the French monarchy and the anti-Semitic policies of Vichy. As good non-patriotic citizens, they refused to participate in nationalist ceremonies or to salute Vichy officials, and they sheltered some 5,000 Jews until the end of the war. The region became a hothouse of Resistance activity. See Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (Harper Perennial, 1994).

\(^{110}\) She says of conquest that it is “nearly always an evil,” an expression of epistemological humility that seems odd when not contrasted to Renan’s misguided confidence. Weil has learned very well the lesson of her earlier mistake in calling the State the “supreme enemy.” Weil, *The Need for Roots*. p. 44.
historical conquest to political irrelevancy. Contrary to Renan’s expectations, Weil finds that the long-since-accomplished conquests that “fused” France have indeed had ongoing, negative implications among marginalized and minority populations - as well as for the Republic as a whole. Decades after “What is a Nation?”, she finds the provinces and their populations deeply alienated from national life, stereotyped by the metropolis, and chafing under cultural and linguistic chauvinism in the schools. Generations of prescribed forgetting have accomplished disaffection rather than unity, a problem with direct bearing on the Republic’s survival in 1943.111

Moreover, recalling the terms in which many French citizens justified collaboration with their conquerors, Weil argues that the habit of national forgetfulness played a key role in France’s downfall. Many of her fellow-citizens, Weil notes, had until recently expected France to forge a European union. When France failed to accomplish the task, they simply looked to the next likely candidate for the job.112

When one has got into the habit of considering as an absolute good… this growth in the course of which France devoured and digested so many lands, is it surprising that propaganda inspired by precisely the same idea, and only substituting the name Europe in place of that of France, should be able to penetrate into a corner of the mind? …The present collaborators have as regards the new Europe which a German victory would create the same attitude the inhabits of Provence, Brittany, Alsace, and Franche-Comte are expected to have towards the past, so far as the conquest of their pays by the King of France is concerned…113


112 Ibid. p. 144.

113 Ibid. pp. 142-143.

In the teaching of history, Weil laments, “the past is nothing else but the story of France’s growth, and it is considered that this growth must necessarily be a good thing from every point of view. No one ever asks
If the *pax romana* and the “fusion” of France from “component populations” each justified brutal conquests, why should European or indeed *global* unity not be purchased at a similar price? Weil heads off the objection that collaborators had simply failed to distinguish “(t)he cruelties accompanying the German system” from the “beneficial” legacy of French conquest. She asks, “Is it not just as easy to be ignorant of the cruelties of the Germans toward the Jews or the Czechs as it is of those of the French toward the Annamites?,”¹¹⁴ suggesting that a people accustomed to dismissing its own crimes easily ignores atrocity elsewhere.¹¹⁵

Against such habits of patriotic forgetfulness, she maintains that “(l)oss of the past…is the supreme human tragedy…It is above all to avoid this loss that peoples will put up a desperate resistance to being conquered.”¹¹⁶ Accustomed to conjuring illusory peace and internal unity through selective forgetting, French patriotism lacked the capacity to resist the greatest threat to its historical continuity. Weil would have her compatriots found themselves on remembrance, commit themselves to the “Song of the Crusade,” and take up France’s liberation and restoration with their eyes open to the provinces and the colonies. She calls on the FFO to found France not on unity forged by great kings (whose brutality is then publicly forgotten) but on a receiving organization

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¹¹⁴ A partial answer perhaps to concerns about her relative silence on anti-Semitism?


¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. 119.
that conveys to the custodial legislator the thoughts and sentiments of a somewhat indeterminate constituency (Occupied Parisians and provincials, Vichyites, colonial soldiers, exiles abroad...), a process designed to engrave fear, shame, aspiration, and hope into the foundations of the polity. But too well her compatriots have learned Renan’s lesson that “it is good to forget” – the good along with the bad.

Renan himself learned the lesson too well. While Renan enjoins political self-forgiveness rather than totalitarian erasure with regard to centuries-old conquest, he accomplishes a much more thorough forgetting of recent and enduring injustices. In direct contradiction of the facts, he claims that France “has never sought to win unity of language by coercive measures.”¹¹⁷ A Breton himself, Renan knows that France’s schools enforce the language of Paris and punish children for speaking patois.¹¹⁸ Unity of language is official, enforced policy. He must also be familiar with the tenacious provincial resistance to metropolitan impositions that Weil will cite several decades later.

What are we to make of this willful loss of memory?

The motive for Renan’s forgetfulness toward ongoing cultural imposition is unclear at first. When he characterizes unity of language as a benign “invit(ation) to unite” in public participation, he seems to side with Parisian partisans of the official tongue. On the other hand, he challenges both metropolitan linguo-centrism¹¹⁹ and

¹¹⁷ Renan. p. 16.


¹¹⁹ Despite the traditional identification of France with “civic nationalism” and of Germany with “ethnic nationalism”, linguocentrism is a form of ethnocentrism. See Weil, “We should be strangely simple…if we believed that racialism is anything at all except a rather more romantic name for nationalism.” Weil, Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943. p. 119.
burgeoning nationalism in the provinces when he denigrates the “exclusive concern with language” as unbefitting a nation.\(^\text{120}\) He even proposes that disputes over national boundaries and citizenship should be resolved by “consult(ing) the populations in the areas under dispute.”\(^\text{121}\) Renan anticipates criticism for this major concession to regional autonomists. However, his concession also puts the internal regime of the nation-state beyond challenge. Forgetfulness as self-forgiveness absolves the patriotic citizen and his nation-state of responsibility for any “dispute” and lays responsibility squarely on marginal populations. Discontented peoples can, in essence, “love it or leave it.” For his part, Renan chose the former.\(^\text{122}\)

In Weil’s view, Renan’s alternatives amount to no choice at all. Echoing the argument she made previously regarding colonial citizenship vs. full independence, she argues that forcing alienated populations in the provinces to choose between national enthusiasm and ethnic secession could easily result in further wrong:

It is only possible partially to repair the past, and this can only be done through a recognized local and regional life receiving the unreserved encouragement of the authorities within the setting of the French nation. Moreover, the disappearance of the French nation, far from repairing in the slightest bit the wrong resulting from past conquest, would aggravate it in a far more serious manner. Admitting that certain peoples underwent…a loss of vitality as a result of French aggression, they would be altogether morally destroyed by… German aggression. In this sense

\(^{120}\) Note that language should not be an “exclusive” concern. It remains one among many legitimate matters of public concern. Nor does ruling out “exclusive” concern with language preclude linguistic exclusivity.

\(^{121}\) Further: “a nation has no more right than a king does to say to a province: ‘You belong to me, I am seizing you’.” No more right, but no less right either. If what Renan holds of the kings’ conquests holds here as well, it is up to history to decide whether the conquest was “beneficial” and, therefore, worth forgetting.

\(^{122}\) Renan. pp. 16-17, 20.
only is the commonplace true, according to which no incompatibility exists between the love for one’s petit patrie and that for the grande… (A) man from Toulouse can passionately regret the fact that his city should some centuries ago have become French…and can still more passionately vow never to permit that (it) should ever become German.\(^\text{123}\)

This is a crucial issue: for both Renan and Weil, the question of regional autonomy sheds light on the essence of the nation itself. Each recognizes a contradiction or an “incompatibility” between the nation’s historical genesis and the demands it makes on those conquered peoples who have since become its citizens. Renan relieves the contradiction by forgetting one of its terms, transforming historical fact into unitary, unsullied principle. Weil takes a different approach, mobilizing memory of multiple pasts and calling on the nation to fulfill its promise as refuge for human souls.

(T)he nation (is) composed of various territorial areas and peoples assembled together as a result of historical events in which chance has played a great part…and where good and evil are always mingled with one another. The nation is a fact, and a fact is not an absolute value. It is just one fact amongst other similar facts…each of the others, considered by itself and with affection, is unique in the same degree.\(^\text{124}\) Not only is each nation one among many – the nation itself is one of a set of similar “facts” – other territories, peoples, and communities with sub-, super-, extra-, or non-national contours and characteristics. Any of these is a potential refuge. When regarded “with affection”, any of them can be a patrie.

Reconceiving the nation as one patrie among many does not eliminate all tension between the “petit patrie” and the “grande.” As Weil notes, the “incompatibility” is only eliminated in the sense that both each can be regarded as patrie. Whether the remaining


This argument echoes her earlier call immediate citizenship rights but not independence for the colonies. Weil, Simone Weil on Colonialism. pp. 69-70.

\(^{124}\) Weil, The Need for Roots. p. 130.
tension between one *patrie* and another is supportive or destructive depends on the obligations one owes to each. She seeks no principle that would eliminate these conflicts *ex ante* (such principles usually function by giving absolute priority to one over the other, as Renan does), but she does offer her conception of Roots as a guide for moral and political agents: “So far as our *patrie* is concerned the conceptions of rootedness, of vital medium (*milieu*) suffice” to elucidate the character, extent, and limits of our obligations, and to help us judge among them.\(^{125}\)

For Weil, the *nation* has the potential to be a vital medium, a refuge, for “a certain part of the soul.” It does not encompass the “whole man” but a *part* of the soul in which “certain ways of thought and action (are) communicated from one person to another.” We might be tempted to call this the political part of the soul, but again Weil limits it scope to “certain” modes of thought and action in common. It is at most *one* political part of the soul, corresponding to one site of political practice.\(^{126}\)

That only a *part* of the soul finds refuge in the *nation* does not diminish the *nation’s* vital importance. Returning to her analogy to bodily needs, Weil holds that “what threatens France with destruction…is equivalent to a threat of physical mutilation” in its potential to traumatize both body and soul. As Weil well understood (*FW, Work Journals*) prolonged suffering can focus one’s entire experience on a single occurrence of

\(^{125}\) Ibid. p. 157.

\(^{126}\) Ibid. p. 157. Politics in Weil always appears pluralistic, a “faculty of composition on multiple planes.” (*Roots, 214*) This is a helpful reminder to political theory, which as a field tends to speak of “the political” and “the public” in the singular.
pain. One should still not mistake the hurting head or the hands for the whole. That a “part” of the soul finds nourishment in a given patrie, national or otherwise, “is sufficient for the obligation to one’s patrie to impose itself as something self-evident. It co-exists with other obligations. It does not require that we should give everything always, but that we should give everything sometimes,” as in times of extreme peril, or when loss of the national “vital medium” would cause loss of many other milieux besides.

Renan, by contrast, holds that the mere “existence” of nations is in itself “a good thing.” the very “guarantee of liberty, which would be lost if the world had only one law and one master.” Thus the nation, which he first prioritized over tribes and provinces, takes priority as well over universal or global community. In fact, as Weil points out, the logic of Renan’s pax romana seems precisely to lead to one law and one master. Why does Renan oppose a cosmopolitan extension of order, with the “great benefit of putting an end to war,” by conquest if necessary? The answer lies in his understanding of consent, which limits political liberty to one moment of decision: the choice between “love it” and “leave it.” He defines consent as “the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form... A

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127 See the “Factory Journal” in Weil, Formative Writings, 1929-1941.

128 Weil, The Need for Roots, p. 158. Weil admits her view results in a paradoxical “situation...which subjects us to absolute obligations...to things that are relative, limited, and imperfect.” (Roots, 157) But the obligation to contribute to the defense of the patrie is absolute only in the sense that it admits of no exceptions. It may be carried out in different ways (Weil considers conscientious objection and other non-violent alternatives), at different times, or to different degrees. It may conflict with other obligations that impose themselves as strongly - particularly where “Order” does not obtain. As ever, judgment is required.

129 “(a)t the present time the existence of nations is a good thing, a necessity even. Their existence is the guarantee of liberty, which would be lost if the world had only one law and only one master...” Renan. p. 20.
nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite.” Importantly, Renan raises consent only after he has established the need for collective, selective forgetting. “(E)very French citizen is obliged already to have forgotten\textsuperscript{130}…” so that the “heritage” on the plebiscite’s daily agenda may be always “undivided.” As Renan puts it, “the two things” that constitute the national principle – common memory and consent - “are in fact but one.” Consent to the nation therefore amounts to little more than a tacit affirmation of inherited forgetfulness.\textsuperscript{131} He compares the “daily plebiscite” to a “perpetual affirmation of life” in an individual’s daily existence.\textsuperscript{132} In other words, it is not a plebiscite at all but an exercise in purely tacit, unconscious, even involuntary “will” of the most abstract variety.\textsuperscript{133} Only those who have not fulfilled their obligation “already to forget” historical injustice, by loving or leaving, must give or withhold consent expressly. The mere “existence” of the nation, and of a plurality of internally unified nation-states, “guarantees” liberty by providing occasion for the one meaningful kind of consent that remains in Renan’s account: consent to membership in the nation.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{130} Anderson notes this is a more faithful translation of the original French, which results in an even stronger injunction to forget. Anderson, p. 200.

\textsuperscript{131} Whether they must forget politically, as Renan does St. Bartholomew, or completely, as he does linguistic chauvinism, is unclear, but Renan’s example seems to supply the precedent.

\textsuperscript{132} Weil’s analogy between politics and the body treats both as occasions for decision or action. The needs of body and soul are met by actors who understand and respond to those needs, and who must judge among them when lack of Order creates incompatibility. Renan’s physical and social body alike involve unidirectional “will” – affirmations of physical and social life as received, “undivided”, with no sense for competing needs or priorities.

\textsuperscript{133} Eugen Weber characterizes Renan’s account as “consent…assumed from indifference.” Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914, p. 112. Compare Weil’s criticism of Trotsky on the peoples’ “toleration” of Soviet rule (see footnote in Chapter 1, page 33).

\textsuperscript{134} Renan, p. 19.
Thus Renan regards a certain orientation to the past - selective forgetfulness of historical crime - as a universal obligation, one that precedes and even encompasses “consent” (the two are “but one”). His “citizens” perpetually render the service of consent-as-forgetfulness to the nation. The nation is primarily an object of obligation, and secondarily an occasion for consent … to itself. With liberty defined in this way, the nation appears by definition a guarantor of liberty. Renan’s nation is revealed as self-referential, a closed circuit, an end-in-itself, a “delimited social area.” He admits it is not “eternal,” a recognition of historical facts and trends, but he nevertheless requires a perpetual sacrifice of memory to extend its duration in time as far as possible.

Weil’s enrooting patrie also includes temporal aspects akin to those found in Renan’s nation: orientation to time and participation in the present. However, in Weil’s conception, these are goods the enrooting community provides to its members, who contribute to the ongoing cultivation of those goods and take up enrooting milieu as beloved patrie. Even then, their obligation to the patrie as such is tied to the patrie’s potential for refuge.

In defining one’s patrie as a certain, particular vital medium, one avoids the contradictions and lies which corrode the idea of patriotism. There is one’s own particular vital medium, but there are others besides. It has been produced by a network of causes in which good and evil, justice and injustice have been mixed up together, and so it cannot be the best possible one. It may have arisen at the expense of some other combination richer in vital properties, and if such has been the case it would be right to regret the fact; but past events are over and done with; the particular

135 Ibid. p. 20.

136 “milieu”

137 This phrase “over and done with” could be extremely troubling if taken out of context, either the immediate context of this passage or the broader context of the overall book. “Over and done with” for
vital medium happens to be in existence, and, such as it is, deserves to be guarded like a treasure for the good it contains.\textsuperscript{138}

For the good it contains. We regard a patrie, whether national or otherwise, as good for its participants, not as good-for-itself. Its existence as such affords no “guarantee” of liberty or justice. Periodic, recurring judgment recognizes the patrie as relatively good according to the character and degree of its provision for human souls, which in turn is a function of souls’ participation and commitment.

Conceiving the patrie as a “vital medium” bears some important institutional implications. Corresponding to nomadic patriotism, Weil advocates a deep federalism of enrooting communities – not federalism in the style of Madison and Hamilton (who claimed their system was both “national” and “federal”)\textsuperscript{139} but the federalism of the syndicalists,\textsuperscript{140} in which power is plural and the powerful fiction of sovereign power (inviolable jurisdiction modeled on God’s supreme power) is attenuated if not abandoned altogether.

If one’s patrie is regarded as a vital milieu, there is no need for it to be protected from foreign influences, save only insofar as that may be necessary for it to be able to remain such, that is to say, not in any rigorous fashion. The State could cease to be absolute ruler by divine right over the territories under its control…\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{138} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 160


\textsuperscript{141} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 161.
Remaking the state as one power among many allows federalism to penetrate down toward provinces but also up toward international organizations, with neither local nor global exercises of authority constituting “crimes” against sovereignty. Weil calls for “international organizations” to exercise a “reasonable and limited authority” in dealing with essentially international problems. Within and across national boundaries, she envisions “progressive associations (milieux) not forming wheels within the wheels of public administration” but nodes of active, eccentric participation. Trade-unions, religious and educational associations, youth groups – a robust set of local, national, international, and global civil societies necessarily distinct from but “in contact with” the State.¹⁴²

For restored France to become “root-fixing ground” it must “be made a favorable setting for participation in and loyal attachment to all other sorts of milieux,” from the provincial to the global. When patrie is conceived as a matter of pluralistic, overlapping, conflicting enrooting milieux, patriotisme itself becomes “diffuse” and “nomadic” rather than exclusive and unitary. This new “patriotic conception…is incompatible with present-day views about the history of the pays, its national grandeur, and above all the in which one talks at present about the Empire.” The patriotism of national grandeur was bandwagon patriotism, useless after (and by implication before) the Maginot Line’s failure, useless after the tanks rolled into Paris. From Weil’s vantage point in the midst of adverse conditions, a “patriotism inspired by compassion” offers the “only sentiment

¹⁴² Ibid.pp. 161, 165.
which doesn’t strike a false note at the present time.”\textsuperscript{143} National pride depends on secure power and its attendant prestige, and it dissolves when these dissolve.\textsuperscript{144}

Compassion, on the other hand, may retain much of its force even when circumstances turn against the patrie. “Isn’t a man easily capable of acts of heroism to protect his children, or his aged parents? And yet no vestige of grandeur is attached to these.”\textsuperscript{145}

The conquered people of France need to feel “at home in (their) patriotism.” Their patrie must be a refuge.\textsuperscript{146}

Having reconceived the patrie as an earthly, relative, limited, and vulnerable entity, Weil presents the Resistance with a choice between Renan’s conception of the nation and her “new conception of patriotism” as “compassion for our patrie”:\textsuperscript{147}

One can either love France for the glory which would seem to ensure for her a prolonged existence in time and space; or else one can love her as something which, being earthly, can be destroyed, and is all the more precious on that account.”\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid. p. 173.

\textsuperscript{144} Patriotism as compassion need not “be confined to an unhappy pays. Happiness is as much an object for compassion as unhappiness, because it belongs to this earth, in other words is incomplete, frail and fleeting. Moreover there is, unfortunately, always a certain amount of unhappiness in the life of any pays.” (Roots, 170)


\textsuperscript{146} “Modern patriotism … can steel some men to the point of supreme sacrifice, but it cannot nourish the desperate masses of today. They need something … familiar, human, warming, simple and without pride. For obedience to be consented to (one of the needs of the soul – footnote.), one needs above all something to love, something for the love of which men consent to obey. Something to love, not through hating its opposite, but in itself. The spirit of consenting obedience stems from love, not from hatred.

…Something to love not for its glory, its prestige, its glitter, its conquests, its radiance, its future prospects, but for itself, in its nakedness and its reality…” Are We Struggling?

\textsuperscript{147} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 168.

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. p. 170. Emphasis added.
That which merely *seems to ensure* France’s prolonged existence is Renan’s selective forgetting, which in order to protect the *nation* from “too searching a scrutiny” into history confines collective memory to “a heroic past, great men, and glory.” Weil, by contrast, requires remembrance of “injustices, cruelties, mistakes, falsehoods, crimes, and scandals.” But patriotism as compassion is more than liberal guilt: it “predisposes one to discern the good” as well.

Where compassion is concerned, crime itself provides a reason not for withdrawing oneself, but for approaching…compassion keeps both eyes open on both the good and the bad and finds in each sufficient reasons for loving.\(^{149}\)

Instead of idealizing forgetfulness, it requires active, open-eyed dedication. As a threshold practice, approach as a mode of critical love may provide a necessary corollary to withdrawal as a mode of engagement.

Moreover, (like uprootedness that causes further uprootedness), patriotism as pride in national grandeur, in belonging to a powerful nation-state, poses a very real danger to North Africa, Indochina, and even Germany should France return to its own imperial aspirations after liberation. For a gregarious patriot like Weil - who had served in the Spanish Civil War, housed German refugees after Hitler’s rise to power, and secured passage home for conscripted French colonial subjects – the patriotism of compassion is a patriotism for refugees:

> Whoever feels cold and hunger, and is tempted to pity himself, can instead…direct his pity toward France; the very cold and hunger themselves then cause the love of France to enter into the body and penetrate to the depths of the soul. And this same compassion is able,
without hindrance, to cross frontiers, extend itself over all countries in misfortune, all countries without exception; for all peoples are subjected to the wretchedness of our human condition. Whereas pride in national glory is by its nature exclusive, nontransferable, compassion is by its nature universal; it is only more potential where distant and unfamiliar things are concerned, more real, more physical, more charged with blood, tears and effective energy where things close at hand are concerned.\footnote{Ibid. p. 172.}

There are serious reasons to doubt that compassion travels without hindrance, or that it \textit{should} do so (reasons I will consider over the next two chapters), but what I want to emphasize here is the ability to “extend itself.” Although the conquered French must feel “at home” in their patriotism, they should not therefore be necessarily sedentary. This is a mobile home. Weil often bemoaned the limited power and efficacy of wide-ranging, attentive compassion. She never doubted its necessity.

Extension, through imagination and especially through forging of relationships across boundaries, is the vital strength of the patriotism of compassion. Workers on behalf of vulnerable France need to find roots there as well as in Brittany, in Christendom, in the colonies,\footnote{“The problem of finding a doctrine or faith to inspire the French people in their resistance today and in their tasks of construction tomorrow is inseparable from the colonial problem.” Weil, \textit{Simone Weil: Selected Essays 1934-1943}. p. 195.} in Europe and in Paris.\footnote{Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. p. 164.} Against those who would resurrect “eternal France,” she proposes a migratory understanding of the \textit{patrie}, enabling allegiance, attachment, and even institutional authority to move among diverse, multifarious spheres of common concern without assigning a final (or primary) preference to any one sphere. Although the territory and people associated with a given
nation-state might at a particular moment be the most salient patrie, or at least the one most urgently in need of defending (as it was for most of the participants in the French Resistance), the patrie as such can only ever coincide imperfectly with the boundaries of the nation-state. Patriotisme should be able to migrate from extended families to rural countrysides, from neighborhoods to humanity and all points, routes, or thresholds between - to whatever overlapping, conflicting, or complementary sites harbor or promise human goods.¹⁵³

From Threshold to Refuge

Dispositionally cautious toward community’s claims, Weil experiments with diverse metaphors for the good community provides: “refuge”, “shelter”, “house”, “asylum”, “warmth”, “some solitude”, “some silence”, “food”, “treasure”, and “roots.” I have chosen “Refuge,” which accomplishes a partial synthesis of Weil’s manifold metaphors while retaining much of the interplay among them.¹⁵⁴ More than any other name, “refuge” holds within itself the ambivalence between shelter and departure. It is both noun and verb. Refuge includes migration.

Although “refuge” by definition reconciles conceptually the disparate moments of entry and departure, shelter and migration, it does not presume harmony in practice.

¹⁵³ In “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” (1942), Weil writes: “It is because it can be loved by us…that the universe is a patrie. It is our only patrie here below. This thought is the essence of the wisdom of the Stoics. We have a heavenly patrie, but in a sense it is too difficult to love, because we can imagine it as we please. We run the risk of loving a fiction under this name…Let us love the patrie of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love.” Weil, Waiting for God. p. 114.

¹⁵⁴ I do not abandon the other metaphors, but will use “refuge” as a general name including them.
Because the several moments of refuge complement and depend on one another, they can also come into conflict. In other words, refuge implies politics. Speaking concretely, providing refuge may depend under certain circumstances - from the apparently mundane (limited floor space) to the explicitly conflictual (intergroup suspicion) - on exclusion, even on excluding some of those who seek refuge. Urgency and emergency may call for prudential judgment to temporarily settle matters, but disagreement, inequality, and mistrust among potential providers and/or seekers of refuge will always occasion debate, decision, and resistance – political moments often downplayed in non-political conceptions of refuge, refugees, and humanitarian or mutual aid.\footnote{I touch on these matters in much greater depth in chapter 4, where I examine the decision-making processes of specific humanitarian projects confronting limited personnel, time, space, money, knowledge, understanding, and energy. In some cases, politicized seekers of refuge encourage providers to interrogate and challenge politically the “circumstances” or “conditions” that once appeared as external, practical constraints on humanitarian aid. On the other hand, humanitarian groups necessarily impose limits on the character of their political interventions, especially when their workers operate in foreign countries – American volunteers in Guatemala should not be making campaign contributions there. Humanitarianism thus constantly negotiates a complex terrain between politics and partisanship, a process that both requires and develops considerable political acumen.}

Refuge is thus closely related to the threshold: each refers to the other even as it draws especial attention to its own space. Each occasions judgment and decision. However, important differences remain. Every refuge possesses a threshold, and thus opens onto risk, but not every threshold opens onto refuge (perhaps for some and not for others, or not-yet, or no-longer…). Put another way, while threshold appears radically indeterminate, even threatening or dangerous, the notion of refuge highlights safety, protection, and security as the ends and the conditions of risky movement. This fact does not eliminate danger but rather highlights specific ones: the dangers of self-consolation, of delimiting social areas as absolute goods, of pursuing absolute security through a
closure that transforms refuge into detention. Highlighting these dangers in turn equips us to attend to them.

Following Weil’s asymmetrical path from a threshold sensibility to an appreciation of the good of refuge mitigates the potentially reactionary effects of prioritizing refuge alone. This is perhaps a political necessity as much as a theoretical one, a response to national political climates that mobilize fear to imperial ends. Beginning from the threshold, Weil can characterize security as a dynamic between safety and risk. She reminds us and herself that the protection refuge affords is necessarily relative, imperfect, partial – lest it cease to be refuge.

In the “Poem of Force,” Weil tells her readers “there is no refuge from fate,” from the basic mutability and impermanence of mortal existence. In her work for the Resistance, she identifies several varieties of illusory, impossible refuge: the “delimited social area,” escape from the “opposition between good and evil” in the world, Security without Risk, “Eternal France,” and the idealized nation whose mere existence “guarantees” liberty. These are comforting fictions, but impermeable refuge amounts to no refuge at all. Since fate, unpredictability, and corruptibility penetrate every actual refuge – and since refuge requires opening onto the world in order to be refuge - we must attend to the thresholds of those shelters we inhabit, learning “not to admire force, not to


hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate.”¹⁵⁷ We must learn how “to recognize (our) patrie in the place of (our) exile”¹⁵⁸ so that we and others may find refuge.


¹⁵⁸ Pétrement. p. 370.
Chapter Three: Cosmopolitan Patriots

From an inquiry into the good of community, Weil’s *The Need for Roots* arrives at a call for wide-ranging compassion, not as an alternative to patriotism but as the form of patriotism reconceived. Her *patrie* is not a bounded territory, or a direct lineage, or a cultural heritage passed on in “undivided form.” It does involve sharing and commonness across space and time, but the pathways of sharing and the contours of commonness are discovered in boundary-crossing practice. The *patrie*’s boundaries continually shift as a result of active participation of the patriot, the difference between participatory, plural “roots” and foundational, singular “root.” Patriotism for this *patrie* is attachment, regard, and sharing as ongoing, migratory practices.

Weil thus plots a trajectory from questions about boundary or scope (what is a *nation*? What is a *patrie*? Where should our loyalties lie?) to questions about compassion, sympathy, or fellow-feeling. She is by no means the only theorist to chart such a course. In contemporary debates about cosmopolitanism, the project of remaking or reconceiving national borders repeatedly leads to the question of how to motivate or sustain attention, affect, and effort beyond the current bounds of existing political communities.

Cosmopolitanism begins as a work of the imagination, of learning to recognize as objects of responsibility (and as subjective actors capable of reciprocal recognition) persons and communities once regarded as “other.” In this it actually differs little from
the patriotic or nationalist projects it presumably opposes or supplants. Just as Madison and Hamilton addressed the People of New York as members of a not-yet American identity, so cosmopolitans address us as members of a global human community. Nation-builders and internationalists alike invite their audience to re-imagine itself as part of a larger whole.

However, those who play midwife to new communities do not confine their work to the imagination of new identities. For cosmopolitans as well as nation-builders, the imaginative extension of identity and concern leads to the creation, reworking, or extension of institutions. The *cosmopolis* takes form as former strangers begin to practice reciprocal recognition, assuming new (or newly-recognized) obligations toward one another. Whether these changes of form and practice result in a global state, or a federation of sovereign nations, or a deliberative forum with minimal enforcement power remains a subject of dispute among cosmopolitan theorists. Nevertheless, the cosmopolitan imagination typically points to some institutional forms or established practices that would facilitate further cosmopolitan imaginings and actions.

As they work through this tension between the importance of establishing institutions and the importance of thinking and acting beyond given bounds, cosmopolitan theorists frequently uphold a *prima facie* distinction between *required* or *enforceable* duties and duties to which we are *called*. The former are often confined to or focused on fellow citizens or co-members, while the latter are understood to draw us out of the particular communities we inhabit to engage the larger, aspirational community of common humanity. The difference may simply reflect the institutional status quo: some
duties are currently prioritized over others, while new ones will be enforced when political will and institutional capacities are sufficient. Alternatively, it may indicate a deeper intuition about the nature of the duties in question: perhaps some should never be enforced, either because they require a voluntary moment or because human beings lack the means to judge others’ fulfillment of them. It may be a difference in kind or degree, a binary or a two-stage gradation of duty.

In any event, the many boundary-crossings undertaken by cosmopolitan theorists and practitioners (and, very importantly as it turns out, their critics) raise this and related questions repeatedly. In this chapter, I consider the contributions of several participants in the contemporary discourse of cosmopolitanism, each of whom retraces a form of Weil’s turn from boundary-drawing to compassionate boundary-crossing as they work between the duties within and those beyond established norms and institutions. Not all are committed to cosmopolitanism as such – Walzer explicitly opposes the notion, while Nussbaum has left it behind – but each is engaged seriously in the problem of cross- and trans-national justice and thereby with the difference between requirement and vocation.

From this examination of diverse perspectives, I will argue (with most of the parties to this debate) that the terrains between requirement and vocation, or justice and charity, are not so much clearly delineated boundaries as broad and poorly-mapped borderlands. Moreover, the importance of vocation and calling to cross-border justice may teach us something crucial about justice and order as such – even within the polity. We may not be able to extract certain duties universally from all able citizens, but we
nevertheless depend deeply (more than we often recognize or want to admit) on those who heed the call to assume variously particular, vocational, and unenforceable duties.

**Walzer’s Bounded Community**

I have said that political theory and philosophy have trouble talking about and to refugees. To his great credit, Michael Walzer takes up the challenge as a crucial test for his theory of justice. Adopting the premise that Membership in political community is the precondition for all other distributions of political goods, he looks to the encounter between current members and aspiring applicants to the body politic as a crucial occasion for justice (or injustice). Predictably, refugees in their “desperation” represent a borderline case. “What can we reply,” he asks, to the refugee’s “forceful claim for admission?”

For the most part, he would have us reply with a welcome. He regards hospitality toward refugees as an “obligation” in many cases, particularly if the host country is responsible for the refugees’ plight. Moreover, responsibility is not confined to liability for direct injury. It may include such factors as co-ethnicity or a looser affinity based on shared ideals.¹ However, when “forced to choose” among claimants, “we will look, rightfully, for some more direct connection with our own way of life.” Cross-border responsibilities, of any kind, can only go so far. “(C)ommunities must have boundaries,” he insists, and they “depend on … a sense of relatedness and mutuality” among the

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¹ He says “when we claim to embody certain principles in our common life and encourage men and women elsewhere to defend those principles” we may have a duty to take in those who find their lives in danger as a result. Walzer. p. 49.
population within those boundaries. “Refugees must appeal to that sense … One wishes them success; but in particular cases, with regard to a particular state, they may well have no right to be successful.”

It is perhaps impossible to avoid sounding callous when denying any refugee, even a hypothetical one, the “right to succeed,” but Walzer distinguishes between two forms of success: the refugee’s appeal for membership in a rights-protecting political community, and the temporary, emergency device of asylum. The former he thinks may be rightly constrained by the political judgment of a people seeking to perpetuate its way of life. But the “claim of asylum” is, in cases of extreme danger to the claimant, “virtually undeniable.” For the practice of asylum, immediate, urgent need temporarily overrides other considerations, mitigating (but not eliminating) the “cruelty” of a dilemma between refugees’ freedom of movement and the rights of sovereign peoples. The refugee in immediate danger possesses a strong “right to be successful,” but the right is limited to safe harbor. It does not extend to membership in the community.

There are at least two major principles at work in Walzer’s answer to the refugee, and they operate in some tension with one another. First, the refugee’s claim for membership is constrained by the community’s sense of itself and its right to determine its collective form of life. On the other hand, the asylum-seeker’s severe vulnerability constrains the community’s will in certain temporary, emergency scenarios. The first

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2 Ibid. pp. 48-50.

3 Ibid. p. 50.

4 I want to give Walzer credit for the radicalism of his proposal. Establishing his standard for asylum would be a massive improvement over current practice in most nation-states, including the United States.
constraint is a principle of intent and life in common, the latter of survival and the help we expect strangers to render in times of extreme crisis.

In *Spheres*, Walzer is focused on the first principle, but the latter (which he terms “mutual aid”) is important as a limiting factor contrasted to the good of political membership:

(T)wo strangers meet at sea or in the desert or, as in the Good Samaritan Story, by the side of the road. What precisely they owe one another is by no means clear, but we commonly say of such cases that positive assistance is required if (1) it is needed or urgently needed by one of the parties and (2) if the risks and costs of giving it are relatively low for the other party.\(^5\)

Walzer is deeply uncertain about the exact line between the principle of community intent and that of mutual aid. He is sure that “there are limits to our collective liability” but he does not claim to “know how to specify them.” It is, for example, unclear which principle applies when he says a community could be “forced” to choose between one set of refugees and another. The measure of “relatively low” risks and costs is also somewhat obscure: “we seem bound to grant *asylum,*” he says, “but if we offered *refuge* to everyone in the world who could plausibly say that he needed it, we might be overwhelmed.” Overwhelmed in what sense? What factors would this calculus take into account: territory, food, and available police, or capacities for tolerance, understanding, even the community’s self-confidence? Walzer does not say. I would be inclined to read this as a matter of scarce physical resources, if not for the fact that asylum remains unlimited. Since asylum is as likely as naturalization to drain material resources, the

\(^5\) Walzer. p. 33.
threat Walzer finds here must apply to identity. Thus he enshrines community intent as the primary limit on the right to hospitality: “the right to restrain the flow (of immigration) remains a feature of communal self-determination. The principle of mutual aid can only modify and not transform admissions policies rooted in a particular community’s understanding of itself.”

Throughout *Spheres*, Walzer describes a very tight relationship between community’s self-understanding and the sharing of goods among its members. He holds that when members of a single polity debate how and to whom goods will be distributed, they do so in the context of a shared “(l)anguage, history, and culture.” Community members argue by “appeal to common meanings,” and these are established by (or at least coincide with) the contours of the political community. Even critics, reformers, and

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6 See Chapter 2, page 131, on the dynamic between inclusion and exclusion and the role of judgment in determining when to close the door to entrants so that refuge may continue to serve as refuge.

7 Walzer. p. 51.

Interestingly enough, the community’s prerogative to choose one refugee over another on the basis of “affinity” seems to come into play only when the community’s survival is at issue, when it is “forced” to choose. In other words, the “justice” of this selection criterion only applies within a limited, emergency circumstance. On this reading, Walzer would oppose cultural or ideological tests for membership under non-emergency circumstances. Alternatively, he may appeal to the emergency circumstance as an intuitive case for a selection criterion he wants to justify more generally. In any event, he ultimately grants the community a “right” to restrain the flow, giving it significant latitude in practice. Much hinges on our sense of what counts as “overwhelming” the community in question.

8 Walzer admits this is a gross generalization, but he also claims that in the political community language, history, and culture “come together to produce a collective consciousness.” The unity implied by that phrase belies his recognition of internal diversity. Ibid. p. 28.

9 He concedes political community is more diverse than this, but maintains it is “probably the closest we can come to a world of common meanings.” Actual diversity appears a deformation of the ideal. Ibid. pp. 28-9.
revolutionaries deploy the concepts of the shared culture, although perhaps to novel purpose.\(^\text{10}\)

In his emphasis on the common or received as foundations of all other sharing, Walzer privileges already-existing, long-established communities. He also privileges received understandings, established norms, and dominant narratives. He explicitly argues against taking “the globe as our setting” for justice, because to do so we “would have to imagine what does not yet exist,” a universal community with its own “set of common meanings” on which to base distributive patterns. Rather than engage in this imaginative exercise, he prefers to “limit (him)self to cities, countries, and states that have, over long periods of time, shaped their own internal life.” The patriotic revolutionary, the nationalist, the separatist, and the cosmopolitan alike will find little purchase here.\(^\text{11}\)

Walzer is least convincing when he criticizes cosmopolitan imaginings on the grounds that they are imaginary. Imagining what does not yet exist and forging commonness across divisions are key elements in the history of every political community, including the “cities, countries, and states” he chooses. But his preference for these long-established forms is more than a conservative preference for the given. The plurality of communities is important in itself, because it permits distinctions between members and strangers that – for Walzer – preserve the very possibility of the good of political community. This he defines as “a bounded world … a group of people


committed to dividing, exchanging, and sharing social goods, first of all among themselves.” The origin of “common meanings” that facilitate sharing and distribution is a founding moment of communal decision when the community’s membership defines itself and asserts its sovereignty over future decisions, especially regarding rules of new membership (tellingly, he does not dwell on the traditionally imaginary nature of this moment). Without “communities capable of making such decisions, there would,” he says, “be no good worth distributing.” To take the world or humanity at large as the setting for just distributions would eliminate this crucial occasion for sovereign decision: to include or exclude a stranger at the gates. Thus, on Walzer’s reading, boundaries are both expressions and foundations of the community’s intention or decision to “share” a life in a certain form.¹²

Community intent and common meanings are therefore also expressed in internal boundaries, the distinctions the community draws among the areas of human activity and the norms applicable to each. Walzer describes justice as the application of appropriate principles to each “sphere” within the polity, reflecting “shared understandings” of the differences among family, economic, and political life. Our names for illegitimate boundary-crossings – nepotism, bribery, etc. – reinforce those understandings and define tyrannical infringements of norms from area on another. If “(t)yranny is always … a particular boundary crossing, a particular violation of social meaning,” then justice, for

¹² Ibid. p. 31.
Walzer, takes the form of literal and figurative boundary-policing to protect against violations of common norms.  

It should be clear from my retelling that I find Walzer’s overall account seriously lacking in several respects. For the Weilian theorist of refuge, Walzer conflates the fundamental need for community with the intermediate good of a given form of community. Walzer holds that Membership in a sovereign political community is “the primary good.” Thus his claim: “if we recognized no distinction between members and strangers, we would have no reason to form and maintain political communities,” implying that security, welfare, and the other goods community provides do not qualify as “reasons” in themselves. Citing Rousseau, he ties exclusive provisions to patriotism, asking “How shall men love their country, if it nothing more for them than for strangers, and bestows on them only that which it can refuse to none?” He resists any conception of political community that would render it instrumental to some other end. Although not  

13 Ibid. p. 28.

Walzer’s conception of justice as a project to ensure the autonomy of distinct “spheres” stands in some contrast to Weilian “order.” Weilian order involves a certain “compatibility” among plural obligations. Like Walzer, she holds that “spheres” of obligation and need should not impinge on one another, but only in the sense that the fulfillment of one duty should not require the sacrifice of another. Does Weil assume too much possible compatibility (she actually says that order, as an ideal, is probably not possible) or does she provide an account that allows for MORE political determination than does Walzer?? Weil seems to envision more discovery of unexpected sharedness, more learning about what one’s duties entail, than Walzer’s defensive boundary-policing of the assumed shared understanding.

14 Briefly summarize issue of plural goods vs. relative goods, food etc. (from DELETED TEXT doc)

15 Walzer, Spheres of Justice. p. 31.

I disagree equally with the corollary claim that “statelessness is a condition of infinite danger.” Obviously, I regard statelessness as a dangerous condition, but the danger is most certainly not “infinite,” which implies that it is necessarily worse than any danger one might face within a state, including totalitarian ones. Still, I share Walzer’s concern for the stateless and I appreciate particularly the development it has taken in his later writings, discussed at the end of this chapter.

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quite guilty of turning the political community into a “delimited social area,” his formula “Political community for the sake of provision, provision for the sake of community” comes quite close to community “for itself” rather than “in itself.”

Compare Weil on the good of community, the provision of roots, and the nature of love for community “in itself.” Weil recognizes “roots” as a crucial, even primary human need. Moreover, roots are recognizably communal, involving active participation and continuity in time. She describes Enrootedness as “the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” However, she reserves somewhat different language for the “collectivity,” the concrete form that community happens to take at any given moment. “we owe our respect to a collectivity, of whatever kind – country, family or any other – not for itself, but because it is food for a certain number of human souls.”

Any particular instance of roots as constituted “collectivity” is subject to judgment, criticism, commitment, resistance, and/or support according to its provision for members (a standard that is itself subject to judgment, insofar as the “balance” between mutually implicated but opposed goods is achieved in dynamic practice rather than “struck” by final calculations). In particular, the borders and boundaries of the political communities we inhabit are rendered contingent rather than foundational. When Walzer names specifically political community the primary good, he reifies its boundaries, leaving little room for migrations in search of roots and refuge.

16 Ibid. pp. 64-65.

17 Weil, The Need for Roots. p. 43.

18 Ibid. p. 8.
Weilian Roots also put significant pressure on Walzer’s conception of the common. In Walzer’s political community, argument and conflict over goods take place with reference to “common meanings” and “shared understandings.” Little is said about one of most important forms of political argument: contestation over the terms of argument themselves. For Weil the threshold-dweller, by contrast, the pathways of common meanings and shared understandings are open-ended and uncertain. We may interrogate, critique, and challenge existing boundaries, and we will likely find that they inhibit, damage, or consume roots to some degree, but also that they foster, protect, and encourage them. How to respond to our discoveries is a matter of judgments both individual and collective.

Walzer of course invited a good deal of criticism along these lines for the less careful communitarian moments of *Spheres*. He would later respond to his critics by emphasizing the limits to the authority of “common meanings.” In *Thick and Thin*, he insists he does not leave us at the mercy of the dominant culture’s shared prejudices or mistakes. “I now hasten to add (that) justice in distributions is a maximalist morality, and it takes shape along with, constrained by, a reiterated minimalism – the very idea of ‘justice,’ which provides a critical perspective and a negative doctrine.” Indeed, Walzer now finds significant purchase in a number of “minimal,” broadly applicable concepts of the sort he had either downplayed or tightly constrained in *Spheres*, including mutual aid,

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that pull him much more readily across national borders into other relationships of recognition and duty.\textsuperscript{20}

With his eye on struggles for justice around the globe, struggles that frequently address \textit{themselves} to audiences beyond their own borders, Walzer requires a means to distinguish helpful boundary-crossings from tyrannical violations. He thinks the “moral minimalism” provides for temporary and “limited, though important and heartening, solidarity.” Where maximal justice as imagined in \textit{Spheres} depended on broad sharing within bounded community, moral minimalism is built on less sure foundations. It depends on

the fact that we have moral expectations about the behavior not only of our fellows but of strangers too. And they have overlapping expectations about their own behavior and ours as well. Though we have different histories, we have common experiences and, sometimes, common responses, and out of these we fashion, as need, the moral minimum. It is a jerry-built and ramshackle affair…\textsuperscript{21}

The moral minimum is more often negative than positive. Its pronouncements are restrained in scope but more intense in their insistence and urgency. We can, he says, agree with Isaiah that it is “unjust to grind the face of the poor” even when we cannot agree on what constitutes just treatment, and we will likely oppose injustice with greater energy than when we turn to the constructive project of establishing just practices and institutions.\textsuperscript{22} Such a moral minimalism of broadly shared if “thin” values “explains how it is that we come together” across borders and distance but still “warrants our


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. pp. 17-18.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. pp. 6, 19.
separation” into smaller, thicker political communities. It is “not foundational” and it does not assume some prior agreement about the values to which we appeal. It offers no guarantees. And yet, “we are constantly surprised by goodness in others … The value of minimalism lies in the encounters it facilitates, of which it is also the product (even as it) presupposes thickness elsewhere,” to which we return when our solidarity with political strangers is at an end.23

I find much to like in this account, insofar as the migration from thick to thin and back elucidates a crucial component for a theory of refuge. Yet, my commitment to Weil again raises a few points of hesitation. In particular I note the relatively privileged place of the thick vs. the thin, and the mode of travel it describes between the two. Walzer characterizes the cross-border minimalist morality as “a view from a distance or a view in a crisis, so that we can recognize injustice only in the large.”24 Although crisis may certainly play a role, cross-border morality in practice cannot be reduced to a view from a distance. The interaction between proximity and distance is more complex than this. The impetus to express solidarity depends in great part on those travelers on the ground who relay information and urgency to the rest of us. Reporters, journalists, activists, ambassadors, missionaries, colleagues, and friends and family abroad take the view from up close and convey it (or attempt to convey it) to those at home. Not only information but practiced solidarity often goes beyond sympathy from afar. For Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF), one of Walzer’s favorite examples, the minimalist morality is

23 Ibid. p. 18.

24 Ibid. p. 39.
exercised perhaps most effectively by the international volunteer’s physical presence in a zone of conflict to which she does not “belong.” A certain distance remains, insofar as the volunteer retains her cultural perspective and sensibilities (and therefore depends on the “national staff” of locals who make up the large majority of MSF’s staff), but the tension between experiential distance and physical proximity is one of the most generative powers at work in cross-border engagements.  

Walzer speaks of the “value” of cross-border encounters, which he regards as both products and facilitators of a minimalist morality that, in turn, presupposes “thicknesses” to which its agents must return. For him, the value resides primarily in opportunities for solidarity, a good will and support given from a distance. Solidarity bolsters struggles for justice, but does not seem to do much to inform them. It flows from the relatively privileged to those facing democratic and egalitarian deficits. But in practice, cross-border engagements do more than pull us out of our own spheres whenever affective ties, alliances, or sympathy with suffering others demand a response. They also put pressure on our own “thicknesses.” The dynamic between proximity and distance in every cross-border interaction resembles not so much a dynamic between “thick” and “thin” as continual cross-pollination and cross-contamination among diverse thicknesses, each of which owes its very existence and historical development in part to alien influences. Remembering Weil’s concern about France’s habitual inoculation against “contrary information,” we might look to alien “thickness” to teach us justice,

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each thickness benefitting from the view from elsewhere as a corrective or even a jolt to its most myopic, self-serving and self-consoling self-understandings.

Properly chastened about his excessive deference to the already shared, Walzer clarifies in *Thick and Thin* that social meanings as we receive them always bear histories of dispute and internal dissension. I would add that the disputes and the leverage for dissent are often due to something like a minimalist morality *in concert with* the thick view from elsewhere. If Walzer is right that all socialization, from the teaching of language to ethical formation, involves a coercive moment, then the cross-cutting influence – even just the existence - of countervailing languages, value sets, and perspectives may be among the most important resources we have for informed, meaningful participation in rather than passive assent to given culture. Without the stranger, the “shared” as progressive, unstable order may not be possible. The shared would become static, merely imposed, in all the frightening ways Walzer’s critics have reminded him.

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26 This account is also different from that Walzer puts in the mouth of his imaginary critic, who argues for a necessary appeal to “thin” universals when immanent critique of the given culture has been exhausted and proven insufficient. Here the “minimalist morality” is a morality of last resort. I see the minimal and maximal morality as much more deeply and mutually implicated in one another, with the former often occasioning developments in the latter. Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. p. 47.

27 Thankfully, lots of the members with whom we think we share a life in common are stranger to us than we are prone to remember – including ourselves.


Walzer is right that those who act on a minimalist morality, across certain boundaries, must exercise a certain self-restraint, the prudential and contingent limitation of scope (but not of energy) that distinguishes, say, Amnesty International at its best from the Comintern at its worst (Walzer’s examples). Those of us with any respect for cultural difference, whether informed by cultural anthropology or the more pragmatic dictates of diplomacy, generally agree that we should exercise some self-restraint and sensitivity when communicating across national borders. Not only pluralism but experience and knowledge inform
Walzer displays a more sophisticated understanding of these issues when, somewhat unexpectedly, he concludes with a call for “political structures best suited to (the) multiplication and division” of identities and loyalties:

These won’t be unitary structures; nor will they be identical. Some states will be rigorously neutral, with a plurality of cultures and a common citizenship; some will be federations; some will be nation-states, with minority autonomy … Since the nature and number of our identities will be different, even characteristically different for whole populations, a great variety of arrangements ought to be expected and welcomed. Each of them will have its usefulness and its irritations; none of them will be permanent; the negotiation of difference will never produce a final settlement.  

This amounts to a powerful revision of his earlier, default-Westphalian take on state sovereignty and the nation-state as the locus of commonness and sharing.

In Spheres, the collective exercise of political sovereignty was revealed in its essence in the border encounter between members and non-members seeking entry: “We who are already members do the choosing, in accordance with our own understanding of what membership means and what sort of a community we want to have. Membership as a social good is constituted by our understanding; its value is fixed by our work and conversation; and then we are in charge (who else could be in charge?) of its

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this imperative to epistemological modesty in our dealings away from home. I wonder, however, whether the same concern does not apply equally well within the borders of an internally diverse polity. Should liberal theorists be more circumspect in their pronouncements on the Amish? Should citizens in Arizona give New York City some latitude to determine for itself whether it wants an Islamic cultural in downtown Manhattan, and New Englanders hesitate before pronouncing, one way or another, on immigration politics in the Southwest? I am unprepared to argue either way, but I suspect that respectful and prudential silences as well as strategic violations of decorum and agonistic contestation should play a role in political encounters both within and beyond polity’s borders.

29 Ibid. pp. 82-83. Emphasis added.
Again, there is rather little recognition here of the role played by strangers, diplomats, visitors, liaisons and other xenoi in the constitution and ongoing development and of a community’s self-understanding.

And yet, even here Walzer recognizes that specific decisions about membership are “also governed by our relationships with strangers – not only by our understanding of those relationships but also by the actual contacts, connections, alliances we have established and the effects we have had beyond our borders.” For example, the host country may be responsible to refugees with whom it shares some “bond” or “affinity … across political lines.” In his view, we have real duties to co-ethnics, co-idealists, and those displaced by the effects of our agency abroad.31

This principle, which goes beyond the minimalism of “mutual aid,” appears radically at odds with the strong sovereignty he attributes to the community. How much pressure do these concrete relations put on the will of the political community? Does their governance stop at the moment of decision – “in or out” – or can it reach all the way to the value and meaning of membership itself? In short, might our cross-border relationships teach us things we don’t know about what it means to be a member of this “our” polity – who feeds us, who lived here before us, what forgotten or unseen principles work in our foundations?

Tellingly, Walzer argues that the duty of the polity to non-members and its liability for effects abroad are limited when the relationship between members and

30 Walzer, Spheres of Justice. p. 32.

31 Ibid. p. 32. Emphasis added.
strangers can be characterized as one of antipathy rather than affinity. Analytically, I find it hard to conceive of affinity and antipathy as mutually exclusive, while historically and politically speaking, antipathy usually results from the very considerations that Walzer thinks do generate obligations to strangers: the “actual contacts, connections,” and “effects” we have beyond our borders. I would argue that antipathy is most likely to result from contact, connections, and the effects of the polity on strangers. It will rarely, if ever, stem only from essential cultural differences divorced from a history of interaction and domination. As Walzer agrees, even “the injury we have done (to others) makes for an affinity between us.” The pure antipathy he cites as a limit to hospitality will be very rare indeed, and should be intensely interrogated where it appears to occur.32

Ironically, Walzer’s own critique of guest-workers programs and the underclass of disenfranchised metics they create within the polity’s borders points the way beyond his account of sovereignty and border-policing: “No democratic state can tolerate the establishment of a fixed status between citizen and foreigner … Men and women are either subject to the state’s authority, or they are not; and if they are subject, they must be given a say.” Once we admit this principle, it raises the question of those metics who live abroad, workers in maquiladoras, sugar plantations and iPhone assembly plants who participate in our economy and experience its effects but who have almost no say in the policies that govern it. Aside from the economic realm, men and women beyond our


See Chapter 4, page 248, on the attempt by some activists to “ politicize” the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s.
borders are most certainly subject to the power of our state (increasingly so during the limitless war on terror), if not to its authority.\textsuperscript{33}

Still, Walzer continues to resist the conclusions to which some of his own insights and principles pull him. He fundamentally conceives the Other in threatening terms. The stranger’s past is that of the enemy:

\begin{quote}
In a number of ancient languages … strangers and enemies were named by a single word. We have come only slowly … to distinguish the two and to acknowledge that, in certain circumstances, strangers (but not enemies) might be entitled to our hospitality.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

The characterization is somewhat strange, since at least one ancient word for “stranger” famously carries very different connotations: the Greek “xenos” names aliens and enemies but also refers to the tradition of the “guest-friend,” an inherited, cross-polity relationship of mutual hospitality passed down from father to son. Beyond the demands of “mutual aid,” the ancient practice of xenos institutionalized encounters with strangers.\textsuperscript{35} In the Iliad, for example, the existence of a xenos relationship between Diomedes and Glaukon stays their hands on the battlefield at Troy.\textsuperscript{36} Weil regards their

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\textsuperscript{33} Ibid. pp. 32, 61.
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Walzer cannot rely on the distinction between power and authority in any case, insofar as the metic underclass he describes within the polity’s borders are “subjects” rather than citizens, and thus far their relationship to the state – like those of outsiders – is one of power rather than of authority. This is a complex distinction, since we would possibly want to say that states exercise “authority” rather than “power” over non-citizen guests, like tourists. Still, a tourist is distinguishable from a migrant worker precisely to the degree that his or her status as a traveler is protected by international law and agreements among national governments. The condition of the metic is objectionable because prolonged and more-or-less exploitative. The metic’s duration of residence exceeds the capacity of cross-border diplomacy to protect him from the host country’s abuses.

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\textsuperscript{34} Ibid. pp. 32-33.
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\textsuperscript{35} See Gabriel Herman, \textit{Ritualized Friendship and the Greek City} (Cambridge University Press, 1987).
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exchange as one of the Iliad’s “luminous” moments dispelling the power of force. That Walzer reads only “enemies” and “strangers” in ancient tongues suggests that he overdetermines antipathy and underdetermines sympathy in the long view of human history.

*Spheres*’ reading of the Good Samaritan parable is similarly strange, especially given Walzer’s interest in membership and common life. Reading this story as an illustration of thin, minimalist “mutual aid,” Walzer concludes “My life cannot be shaped and determined by such chance encounters.” But it clearly is so shaped. That is the point of the parable, in which the question posed to Jesus is, in essence, a version of Walzer’s inquiry into Membership: “who is my neighbor?” Jesus troubles the question, recasting “neighborhood” as a question of practices toward those we encounter wherever and whoever they may be, instead of a principle of boundary-drawing and determining duties *ex ante*. The Samaritan of the parable is a non-member who interrupts his journey to render aid to a man ignored by his authorities. How do we know the impact or the costs to the alien Samaritan of this act? How does a Good Samaritan encounter differ

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39 In his ethics classes, Ambassador James Joseph offers a reading of this parable which draws the Samaritan into political relations with the robbed and beaten man on the road. “It’s good to bring the beaten man home and take care of him, but if you keep finding more victims, at some point the Samaritan has to ask, ‘why is no one policing this road?’” I like this impulse, but I think the parable already addresses the question. Since duly-constituted political and religious authorities have already passed and ignored the beaten man, a politically-savvy Samaritan might reasonably conclude the police themselves carried out the beating. Or perhaps the police powers are so culpably negligent as to be untrustworthy. Depending on the state of police power (and of his own status, if the Samaritan is an outsider, as in the parable) the Samaritan might have to prioritize tending to the injured in the short term, which will in turn be an unavoidably political act. (Personal teaching notes)
from the “actual contacts” beyond our borders that Walzer thinks should govern our common life to at least some extent? Is it not the case that such chance encounters, however brief, are often deeply transformative in ways that exceed our expectations even of long-term friendship and co-citizenship?

In *Thick and Thin*, Walzer adopts a rather more receptive stance to the stranger. Responding to events in Eastern Europe, he imagines how the minimalist morality of mutual aid would “facilitate encounters” with strangers, *forging* the cross-border alliances, contacts, and relations with strangers that, in *Spheres*, were simply taken as given. In *Spheres*, our contacts with others are constraints on our collective will, problems to be negotiated, limiting factors but not evidently good in themselves. For the later Walzer, cross-border contacts appear increasingly good, and the minimalist morality of “mutual aid” actively fosters them (even if it is sometimes too quick to return to the “thickness that is its own” - forgetting its souvenirs, baggage, and contaminants). Even with its shortcomings, *Thick and Thin* opens the way for unexpected discovery and encounter as modes of justice alongside boundary-policing.

One of Walzer’s strengths is his deep willingness to reconsider and hone his arguments in light of input from others – an example of the value of contacts with difference. Over time, this intellectual tendency has overridden the reification of borders in *Spheres*. As we will see, Walzer’s cosmopolitan colleagues have pressured him to

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*Spheres* begins with the premise that equality across humanity “has to do with our recognition of one another as human beings, members of the same species, and what we recognize are bodies and minds and feelings and hopes and maybe even souls. For purposes of this book, I assume the recognition.” (*Spheres*, xii) The premise is eminently Weilian in its open-ended regard toward unspecified others, less so in its insistence on “species” as an immutable trait and the notion that recognition can be safely “assumed.” The later essays demonstrate greater awareness of such recognition as a fundamental and ongoing problem for justice and politics rather than a premise that we can presuppose at the outset.
think and act further across (if not beyond) the boundaries of received political community. As of 2011, his most recent work has moved powerfully toward the intentional development of cross-border relationships that are both transformative and revelatory.

Nussbaum’s Departure from the Cosmopolis

In her well-known 1994 essay, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” Martha Nussbaum argues that patriotic attachment to the nation should give way to “allegiance to the worldwide community of human beings,” a cosmopolitan ideal she derives from the Stoic tradition. “Each of us dwells”, she suggests, “in two communities – the local community of our birth, and the community of human argument and aspiration,” but she thinks we should give “first allegiance” to the latter. While she concedes the effective importance of “giv(ing) one’s own sphere a special degree of concern,” she insists that “the circle that defines our humanity” merits “special attention and respect” beyond that rendered to the particular.

Despite the language of allegiance, Nussbaum holds that “cosmopolitan conduct” and “world citizens” may exist wholly independently of a “world state.” Global information networks and the plethora of international NGOs that influence national governments’ policy provide “many practical opportunities for world citizenship that were simply not available to the Stoics, or even to Kant and his contemporaries.”

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41 Benhabib, deliberative democrat also makes much of the idea that “the moral conversation” extends “to all of humanity.” Benhabib. p. 14.

these forerunners were largely confined to “thinking and writing” cosmopolitically, the contemporary globalized agent may add to her intellectual pursuits: “financial support for human rights watch” or “more direct participation in deliberations” at the UN or the World Social Forum. “The absence of a world state,” she concludes, “does not thwart cosmopolitan conduct, then, for those who are genuinely committed to it.”^43

“Genuine commitment” is crucial. Allegiance to such an abstract, universal concept as humanity at large renders cosmopolitanism “a kind of exile.” Citizens of the world are heroic figures who refuse “refuge” in the “idealized image of a nation” and its “props of habit and local boundaries,” choosing instead a life often “bereft of any warmth or security.” Cosmopolitanism is therefore, paradoxically, a lonely business.^44

Nussbaum has since abandoned the “comprehensive ethical position” of cosmopolitanism (although she has retained the concept of a citizen of the world), rightly perceiving its shortcomings: the facile conflation of polity with communities of argument and aspiration, the insistence that allegiance always reside in only one place, and the reliance on Stoic “uprooting” and unworldliness to shore up a heroic ethic of vanguard world citizenship.^45 She now prefers a different approach to the tension between morality’s universal call and the pull of particular attachments, one that recognizes the nation-state’s importance as an agent for the fulfillment of duties. Nevertheless,

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^44 Ibid. pp. 7, 15-17.

Nussbaum’s route of departure from the comprehensively cosmopolitan ethic offers insight into her current understanding of duties and their appropriate agents.

The importance of “commitment” for Nussbaum’s early, comprehensive cosmopolitanism provides a helpful entry point. As Judith Shklar notes, “commitment” implies responsibilities assumed voluntarily, as to a cause or an association. By contrast, where identity and participation are not matters of individual choice, where the community has thick and enforceable claims over its members, we are more likely to speak of “obligation” or “loyalty.” From this perspective, Nussbaum’s original heroic “world citizen” is at bottom a kind of volunteer.46 Indeed, world citizens must be “genuinely” and deeply committed not only because the cosmopolis is abstract but because “cosmopolitan conduct” takes place in addition to numerous local obligations, such as paying taxes, voting, jury duty, and other citizenly duties (assuming the actor in question has the fortune to be a citizen where these apply.) I may choose to donate to Human Rights Watch or to attend the World Social Forum. I may even regard these acts as matters of right action rather than mere preference, as Nussbaum clearly does. Nevertheless, I would undertake such deeds in addition to the duties of citizenship and with different and differently enforceable expectations of my imagined fellows.

It is for reasons like these that Michael Walzer asks why “citizenship” should be the name for one’s relationship to the hypothetical global community (a question that remains relevant to Nussbaum’s continuing use of the phrase “citizen of the world”). What, he wonders, are the institutional structures and decision procedures of the

cosmopolis? He readily recognizes “commitments beyond the borders of this or any other country” but maintains that “these are not citizen-like commitments.” He prefers Nussbaum’s metaphor of concentric “spheres” of allegiance, although he thinks we start at the center rather than the outermost circle. Instead of “first allegiance” to the outside, he envisions a cosmopolitan education of extension from the tribe, “a concrete, sympathetic (but not absolutely engaged) account of the inner circles – and then an effort not so much to draw the outermost circle as to open the inner ones out.” With its shift from delineation to opening, this far subtler (if still too-concentric) picture leaves room for more than one type of “commitment” and, by extension, more than one kind of community.

In a similar vein, Charles Taylor asks whether Nussbaum actually describes cosmopolitanism “as an alternative to patriotism,” or whether the space she leaves for smaller spheres of concern might not leave room for patriotism despite her apparent distaste for the word. For his part, Taylor believes that the modern, democratic nation-state requires “strong identification on the part of their citizens,” but he also wants to sign on to Nussbaum’s openness to “universal solidarities” that transcend national borders. He concludes “we have no choice but to be both cosmopolitans and patriots.”

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47 I agree that we cannot reduce all commitments to citizen-like commitments, but I would ask in what respects cross-border commitments resemble or differ from those among citizens.


This and the other responses I consider here are collected in For Love of Country along with Nussbaum’s original essay. The book is edited and introduced by Nussbaum, who adds her own response in the form of a second essay at the end.

Anthony Appiah joins Taylor in defending a greater role for partial attachments. For Appiah, “humans live best on a smaller scale,” and so we should “defend not just the state, but the county, the town, the street … circles among the many circles that are narrower than the human horizon.” Good cosmopolitans “defend the right of others to live in democratic states … of which they can be patriotic citizens,” and they “claim that right for themselves.”

In conversation with these and other respondents, Nussbaum’s project has changed considerably. She concedes to her critics that, developmentally at least, “compassion begins with the local.” The trouble is that compassion is so readily confined to the familiar without any justification. Nussbaum insists that “harmony” between our impartial, universalist moral intuitions and our partial, parochial emotional natures requires “devices through which to extend our strong emotions and our ability to imagine the situation of others to the world of human life as a whole.” This will be an educational project, broadly speaking, which will employ academic efforts as well as poetry, literature, and many “generous engagements” with strangers.

So, she changes the register of the argument from drawing the largest circle to expanding the scope of compassion. Instead of prescribing “first allegiance” to one

50 Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” in Ibid. p. 29.

51 Ibid. pp. xiii, 140-141.

52 The shift to which I refer begins with the “Introduction” and the closing “Reply” in For Love of Country. These two short pieces serve to frame the original essay “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism” although, as I argue here, they represent a significant change in Nussbaum’s own account. I would argue, in fact, that none of the four arguments Nussbaum previously advanced in favor of comprehensive cosmopolitanism (11-15) actually amounts to a strong case for an absolute priority for humanity as a whole. Rather, each gives political actors reason to “recognize humanity wherever they encounter it.” (9) This principle, a paraphrase of Marcus Aurelius’ advice, is not about affiliation, allegiance, or loyalty but about attention to
circle over another, which stretched the moral imagination to heroic scale, Nussbaum is content to point out that sympathy and compassion “should not stop with local attachments,” that we should “recogniz(e) humanity in the stranger.” These are intuitive claims that most of patriotism’s defenders will concede in their minimalist form. After all, even Burke’s “little platoons” are supposed to teach a love of mankind at large. The challenge of global justice now concerns the efficacy and range of various “devices” for the imagination, from the platoons to patriotism and beyond.\(^5\)

However, Nussbaum’s increased focus on compassion puts her at odds with the Stoics who first taught her to “recognize humanity in the stranger.” While this idea sounds on its face like a call to compassion, Nussbaum now observes that, for Aurelius and Cicero alike, our ability to “respect dignity” and “find humanity in the stranger” must operate independently of compassion. In fact, compassion is suspect precisely because of its limitations and its tendency to cling to the familiar. Seeking escape from (rather than extension of) the “messier and more inconstant motive of compassion,” the Stoics (and their descendants, Kantians and others) held that “respect for human dignity” alone could “move us to appropriate action” on behalf of others both familiar and unfamiliar.\(^5\)

Before leaving the cosmopolis behind, then, Nussbaum takes it upon herself to demonstrate why, despite the Stoics’ suspicions, universal respect needs devices of compassion, while human dignity fails if left to stand alone.


For Nussbaum, the crux of the problem lies in the Stoic notion that human dignity is ultimately untouched by misfortune. Dignity’s immutability is supposed to ensure unconditional, equal respect for all, freeman or slave. As worthy as that goal may be, Nussbaum thinks this approach ultimately leads to quietism and incoherence in the face of actual injustice.

The Stoics’ notoriously selective stances on slavery illustrate her concern: as a rule, they oppose the abuse of slaves but not the institution of slavery itself. Basic respect for human dignity motivates the former; the conviction that basic dignity is untouched by misfortune justifies the latter. In fact, however, the Stoics give no satisfactory reason to apply the standard of dignity differently in each instance.\(\text{ct 19}\) Only comfort and familiarity with the institution can explain their selectivity. Given this incoherence and its tendency to default to the status quo, Nussbaum concludes that mere respect for the immutably human leaves us without “enough resources to motivate intense concern for people anywhere,” much less universally.\(^{55}\)

Immutable dignity creates especial problems for global justice. These come to the fore in Cicero’s description of the difference between “duties of justice” and “duties of material aid.” On Nussbaum’s reading, Cicero promises to describe “justice” and “beneficence” as two aspects of a single virtue, but he ultimately erects a high barrier between the two. The result is an account in which basic justice (correlative to Kantian, minimalist standards) applies universally and without exception while duties to provide

\(^{55}\) Ibid. pp. 19-21.

As I read Weil in Chapter 2, she describes a doubled form of respect for different aspects of the human (centre vs. sides) in order to combine unconditionality with the impetus to act. See Chapter 2, page 93.
“material aid” to needy others are highly “elastic” with “a lot of room to prefer the near and dear,” – too much room, in Nussbaum’s judgment.  

Cicero’s account of material aid continues to exercise a powerful influence our intuitions about justice among strangers, emerging (among other places) in Walzer’s constrained principle of “mutual aid.” For Cicero as for Walzer, the duty to provide aid applies to humanity in general only “when no significant material loss ensues” to the provider. Fire and water can be given freely because they are relatively bottomless resources, but we have to limit such duties on the whole because the “infinite number of people in the world” could conceivably overwhelm our capacity to provide for them and for ourselves. Minimal, negative justice – by contrast – can be extended to all because it costs nothing. I can, presumably, indefinitely refrain from torturing or murdering innumerable distant others. I cannot feed or clothe all of them.  

Hearkening back to her defense of compassion, Nussbaum points out that Cicero justifies partiality for the near and dear by reference to the idea that dignity is untouched by suffering, leaving us free to let distant or unfamiliar others go hungry, or worse. Again, she finds his selective application of this idea frustratingly incoherent: “if we are really thoroughgoing Stoics, we should not care about just or respectful treatment any more than about material aid.” Torture and abuse do not touch the essential dignity of the


57 In this Walzer departs from Cicero. Walzer is less concerned with material limits than with threats to cultural and political self-understanding.

person any more than poverty or enslavement.\textsuperscript{59} At some level, she suspects, Cicero draws the line on the basis of his political rather than his philosophical commitments. We recapitulate his biased incoherence (reinforced in later centuries by Christian ideas about the soul’s priority to the body) whenever we “express horror at ‘crimes against humanity’ but never consider that failures of material aid might be such crimes.”

Nussbaum does allow for a “partial asymmetry in our material duties” to those nearby and to humanity at large (in light of her concession that “compassion begins with the local”), but she argues that neither Cicero nor his successors can justify (even on thickly Stoic grounds) the “radical confinement” of these duties to “the interior of the republic.”\textsuperscript{60}

It is one thing, however, to demonstrate that duties (or compassion) should not simply stop at a border. It is quite another to describe which duties should cross, under what conditions, and by which means. Nussbaum recognizes the “difficulty of assigning the duties.” One of the intuitions justifying the traditional distinction between universal norms of justice and restricted duties to provide material aid is the fact that “we imagine we can give respect and truthfulness and non-rape and non-torture and non-aggression to everyone, and there is no difficult distributional problem” until we get to “material aid.” Here we are confronted by numerous “needy recipients” as well as the “many different

\textsuperscript{59} Again, Weil offers a different account. The centre or essence of humanity can be wounded via the vulnerable sides, insofar as its indomitable expectation of good and not evil can be disappointed – again and again. Even so, the “cry itself is infallible.”

\textsuperscript{60} Nussbaum, "Duties of Justice, Duties of Material Aid: Cicero's Problematic Legacy." pp. 191, 202, 205.
levels of both giver and receiver: persons, groups, nongovernmental organizations, governments.\textsuperscript{61}

Still, Nussbaum offers several arguments for lowering the barrier between essentially negative or minimal duties and thicker, positive duties to provide aid: conceptually, she challenges the opposition between omission and commission. On a more practical level, she points out that even minimal justice is not free of cost. It requires courts, police, lawyers, means by which to publicize the laws, and many other resources. If we were equally committed to not murdering persons worldwide, we would develop worldwide mechanisms of justice rather than leaving distant others dependent on our goodwill. But while these considerations may lower the bar between justice and benevolence, they do so largely by importing problems from the sphere of material aid to that of traditionally basic justice. This does not help us get much critical purchase on the “problem of assigning” strong duties for material aid across borders. As Nussbaum says, “we have made things harder and not easier.” A more complete answer, she hypothesizes, will require “theories of institutional versus individual responsibility” as well as a “substantial threshold level of basic goods.”\textsuperscript{62}

Nussbaum takes up these challenges in \textit{Frontiers of Justice}. I cannot address all the many ways this project engages and modifies Rawlsian liberalism and the social contract tradition. For my purposes, I will focus on its description of the Capabilities Approach it describes and its bearing on plural duties and their assignment. As much as

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. pp. 205-206.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. p. 206.
there is to admire in this book, I find that Nussbaum’s route of departure from Stoic norms results not in a pluralist view of the types of duty and commitment (something closer to Walzer’s “opening”) but in a relative reduction of duty’s agents to state-like institutions and initiatives at national and/or global levels. Nussbaum not only lowers the barrier between basic justice and material aid: she does so by putting them both on one side of a threshold between required and vocational duties, and she erects a higher barrier between state and non-state political actors in the process.

Like Weil, Nussbaum begins with a list of needs or goods (conceived in terms of “capabilities”) that she holds crucial to “the dignity of the human (as) a needy enmattered being” and for “a life that is flourishing rather than stunted.” Seeking Stoic unconditionality without Stoic quietism, her Capabilities Approach asserts that certain goods of body and soul (in Weil’s terms) are important for all human beings. At the same time, it leaves room for goods to be interpreted and implemented according to particulars “on the ground.”63 The goods are plural, general in character, and negotiable in the details, but each is part of a minimal “threshold” of justice. A society cannot make up for severe lack in one area with incredible abundance in another.64 Finally, and again like Weil’s list of needs, the Capabilities Approach is anti-foundationalist, “it is explicitly


Nussbaum helpfully identifies a crucial element of any universalist theory that retains respect for pluralism: the distinction between justification and implementation. For example, it is possible to make strong claims on behalf of a certain right or set of rights without committing oneself to military intervention (much to less to preemptive strikes and regimes of torture and indefinite, extralegal detention) in defense of those rights. Criticism, persuasion, and shame are powerful tools, while prudence and the good of political self-rule (MN probably goes too far in calling it “deference to the state”) will impose constraints on our willingness to deploy all of the tools – military and non-military – at our disposal. (FJ 256-7)

64 Ibid. pp. 74-75, 166-167.
introduced for political purposes only, and without any grounding in metaphysical ideas of the sort that divide people along lines of culture and religion.”

One characteristic distinguishing the capabilities approach from Weil’s declaration of needs is the place of compassion. Where Weil turns to compassion as an important *motivating force* at the end of her account, Nussbaum includes compassion from the beginning, *among* the fundamental goods:

The capabilities approach (includes) benevolent sentiments from the start … because its political conception of the person includes the ideas of a fundamental sociability and of people’s ends as including shared ends … Thus, when other people suffer capability failure, the citizen I imagine will not simply feel the sentiments required by moral impartiality, viewed as a constraint on her own self-interest. Instead, she will feel compassion for them as a part of her own good.

Thus Nussbaum turns to Aristotle’s *zoon politikon*, although since she understands her project to modify rather than reject the social contract tradition, she finds him in the state of nature. On her reading, “the person leaves the state of nature … not because it is

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65 Ibid. pp. 78-79. See also pp. 163-164 on the overlapping consensus and the *modus vivendi*.

While Weil argued the obligations to respect and to *indirectly* respect humanity (via the needs of the body and soul) found a “verification in “common consent” across space and time, Nussbaum opposes deep relativism by pointing to “cross-cultural norms.” (FJ 78).

66 Ibid. p. 91.

Weil includes a bit more distance in attentive relationships to others. As we will see in the next chapter, her *attention* (as distinct from compassion) involves feeling the other as barrier and hindrance before acting together with or on behalf of the other. For Weil, this initial moment of hesitation is crucial to prevent appropriation or consumption of the other, which may result from a compassion unmediated by respectful distance.

67 “My aim is to supply something both new and old, resurrecting the richer ideas of human fellowship across national boundaries that we find in Grotius and other exponents of the natural law tradition” (FJ 227)
more mutually advantageous to make a deal with others, but because she cannot imagine living well without shared ends and a shared life.”68

Yet, compassion seems to exert an even stronger pull than the sociability of political animals. In fact, Nussbaum expects compassion, conceived as the identification of our good with that of others, to pull us across boundaries and into global relations of justice. She claims that if we take seriously the “common dignity” of needy, enmattered beings “no matter where” they are located, then our fundamental sociability as compassion will lead us to

the idea that a central part of our own good, each and every one of us … is to live in a world that is morally decent, in which all human beings have what they need to live a life worthy of human dignity.69

If the borders between nations themselves represent a kind of state of nature - both as the physical manifestation of international anarchy70 and, in many regions of the U.S., as the desert terrain where “chance encounters” take place in Leviathan’s blind spots – then the development of cross-border alliances and contacts is also a kind of departure from the state of nature, an entering into political society. Thus, cross-border encounters are not just a matter of “mutual aid” constraining intention. They involve also the intentional pursuit of communion where relations are severed or constrained by borders.71


69 Ibid. p. 274.

70 With Kant, Ibid. p. 231.

71 Ibid. p. 158.
Therefore, Nussbaum rejects the “fixity” and “finality” of the nation-state in Rawls’ and other contractarian approaches that assume the ideal type of “a closed system isolated from other societies” and generate a very “thin” mapping of international and crossborder “terrain.” Nussbaum’s compassionate animals will continue to seek society beyond established bounds. Meanwhile, the Capabilities Approach’s inclusion of life in common as a fundamental good generates only a prudential, contingent commitment to the nation-state as “a key locus for persons’ exercise of their freedom” and fulfillment of needs in accordance with the judgment that, currently at least, no alternative with the same combination of effective power (sufficient to “pervasively” influence “life chances” – following Rawls) and accountability. Conceivably, therefore, Nussbaum’s citizen actors will migrate from site to site as they determine, conceive, or even generate “loci of freedom” at plural sites. Unfortunately however, Nussbaum does not go quite as migratory as Weil, who looks to the province, the guild, and other “milieux not forming wheels within wheels” as crucial co-partners in this work. Rather, Nussbaum travels most easily between the nation-state and globe, less easily within, across, and at a remove from existing polities.

When Nussbaum undertakes to allocate duties from the Capabilities Approach, she argues that we should “think of the duties as assigned, derivatively, to institutional structures.” She admits that “Institutions are made by people,” and that “people …

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72 Ibid. pp. 234-236.

73 Ibid. p. 257.

74 Ibid. pp. 307-308.
should be seen as having moral duties to promote human capabilities.” This is why the duties are assigned to institutions “derivatively.” But, in fact, the duties are not “assigned” or “delegated.” They are “thought,” “seen,” and “regarded” as assigned or delegated. Who is the agency doing all of this “seeing” and “regarding?” Why do we “see” duties as delegated by the people, instead of inquiring into the processes by which duties are delegated?

Then there are the structures we should “regard as” the bearers of duty. Nussbaum initially includes “nations, transnational (and) international agreements and agencies, corporations, NGOs, political movements, and individual people” as potential bearers of duty. Individuals explicitly drop out in the decision to “regard” their duties as delegated (while “movements” hardly qualify as structures), and then the ensuing discussion adopts a strong dichotomy between state-like institutions and individual or associated people. Nussbaum’s “thin, decentralized, and yet forceful global public sphere” involves quasi-state organizations but no mention of the NGOs and other non-state actors that help in actual practice to ensure the accountability of international organizations and governments alike. Civil society, activism, and citizens’ initiative are essentially missing here.75

In fairness, Nussbaum assigns duties to the state and to state-like institutions out of reluctance to assign them to actors from whom we may not extract them. She cites

problems of collective action, fairness, and capacity, and most of all the danger of placing overwhelming demands on individual lives. For reasons like these we should “regard individuals as having delegated their personal ethical responsibility” to state-like structures. I agree that these are eminently justified concerns, but if we want to respect human beings as the original bearers of responsibility we need not comforting fictions about institutions as bearers of duty but an account of the processes, practices, and traditions whereby individual and associated human beings exercise, delegate, and judge authority and responsibility.  

We need to encourage individual and collective actors among the people to take up the state as an instrument (one they should learn to use with others) of the reciprocal discovery, tending to, and fulfillment of duties.

Even derivatively, as a function of individual autonomy or the will of the demos, to substitute “regard-as-consent” for “real, active” participation is a serious misstep.

While the state remains an important instrument for carrying out duties and living in community, we should remember Weil’s insight that agents of order may appear in many guises, often as self-appointed guardians of the duties that have been abandoned, contravened, or ignored by state and other agencies ostensibly appointed to enact them.

Moreover, a Weilian threshold sensibility toward institutions with the power to

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76 Nussbaum often refers to “accountability” as a reason to prefer nation-states to a larger world state, but she provides little in the way of an account of accountability beyond “independent administrative agencies” and mechanisms to detect and prevent corruption. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationalist, Species Membership.* p. 312.

77 Consider Weil’s view of how we should regard the state: “The State in its administrative functions should appear as the manager of the country’s resources; a more or less capable manager, who is expected to be on the whole rather less capable than otherwise, because his task is a difficult one and carried out under morally unfavorable conditions … the pressure of public opinion must always be exercised in the manner of a stimulant encouraging it to leave the path of mediocrity.” Weil, *The Need for Roots.* pp. 176-177.
“pervasively effect” our life chances should raise serious questions about the usefulness of internal accountability mechanisms without significant external pressure from the demos. In short, we need to recognize the vocational and periodic assumption of duty by non-state actors as a crucial aspect or moment even for the conventional understanding of assigned or required duty.

The fundamental problem with Nussbaum’s method of assigning duty is fully revealed in an absurdity that appears at the end of this discussion. Throughout, she distinguishes the capabilities approach as a “threshold,” not a spatial threshold *a la* Weil but a minimal level of needs which any society must answer to be considered just.78 Above this threshold, the Capabilities framework is relatively silent, and “people are free to use their money, time, and other resources as their own comprehensive conception of the good dictates.” Below the threshold, “the political task of supporting the capabilities … is assigned in the first instance to institutions.”79

To me, Nussbaum’s threshold seems in this respect precisely backwards. Allow me to offer a different reading: below the threshold, under conditions of injustice, we will likely depend *more* rather than less on non-state actors, social movements, campaigns, resistance networks, and other collaborations among groups and individuals to bring institutions *up to* a threshold of justice. Beyond this we may assign to the state (while

78 The difference between Weil’s spatial threshold and Nussbaum’s ordinal one is instructive, more than a mere coincidence between terms. For Weil, threshold is an invitation to judgment and movements in and out. For Nussbaum, threshold as benchmark is a delimiting concept that marks boundaries between one kind of principle or action and another. It exercises much of the most important judgment for us. Things either rise above the threshold or they do not. For Weil, departure and emergence are rather less determined and more mutually implicated.

continually verifying its performance) a duty to ensure minimal justice, in terms of capabilities or basic needs. But looking to state institutions “in the first instance” to get us to the threshold and only then giving individuals and other non-state actors broad latitude for supererogatory deeds assumes too sanguine a view of state agency and of our ability to achieve even the “minimal” capabilities threshold. Historically speaking, establishing justice (and even learning what it looks like) requires constant pressure and organization by the governed, would-be sovereign (and therefore apparently unruly at times) people. Nussbaum recognizes that “institutions do not come into being unless people want them, and they can cease to be if people stop wanting them,” but even this recognition is under-theorized with regard to the day-to-day sustenance of institutions and the conditions under which political subjects come to want the new or dedicate themselves to the old.80

Ultimately, Nussbaum identifies the people’s “wanting” with compassionate sentiment or benevolent feelings, assumed at the outset as a function of their nature as political animals. Her strong deference to (beyond use of or dependence on) institutions seems to stem in part from concern about the role of such sentiments her account, which “demands a great deal” of beings at once more benevolent and other-interested than the contractarian tradition commonly assumes and insufficiently compassionate for the Capabilities Approach. What to do under omnipresent conditions of deep injustice and deficits of democracy and compassion? Public education, one of Nussbaum’s favorite

devices, is crucial but not sufficient to this task.\textsuperscript{81} Here, Weil’s sense of “action and the modalities themselves of action as a means of education for the pays”\textsuperscript{82} provides a crucial supplement to Nussbaum’s condundrum. By assuming less compassion \textit{sui generis} and attributing more of a role in establishing justice and its conditions to collaborations among ante-political, non-state actors, we may put Nussbaum’s concern for human capabilities on a surer footing.

\textbf{Appiah: Partial Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism for the State}

Unlike Nussbaum, Kwame Anthony Appiah has maintained a consistent commitment to the idea of cosmopolitanism. This is somewhat surprising since Appiah defended patriotism from Nussbaum’s initial assault in “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism.” However, the source of disagreement between these two philosophers is not so much in their conceptions of patriotism as their divergent accounts of cosmopolitanism.

Appiah’s primary model for patriotic and cosmopolitan virtues is his father, a patriot for Ghana \textit{and} for Africa as a whole, a leader in the Asante tribe and the Christian church, a guest and host to Muslim family members, a husband to an English woman, and

\textsuperscript{81} In \textit{Creating Capabilities}, Nussbaum gestures toward another sense of education. In her most recent work, education for Nussbaum herself has meant getting closer to facts on the ground, “reading” the actual life histories of people for details that muddy our idealizing assumptions. From the beginning, she identified “generous engagements” with strangers as a crucial feature of cosmopolitanism. \textit{Creating Capabilities} begins in its own textual practice to flesh out that idea. For now, however, we will have to look beyond Nussbaum for more on the character, benefits, and pursuit of such engagements. Nussbaum, \textit{Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach}. pp. 12-13, 80-1.

\textsuperscript{82} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}. pp. 187-188.
a father who counseled his children to think of themselves as citizens of the world. Appiah frequently refers to his father’s example to demonstrate that “We cosmopolitans can be patriots...(O)ur loyalty to humankind - so vast, so abstract, an entity - does not deprive us of the capacity to care for lives nearer by.” The model cosmopolitan patriot is attentive to humanity at large but also “intensely engaged with many narrower, overlapping communities.” With this model in mind, Appiah says the “version of cosmopolitanism I want to defend doesn’t seek to destroy patriotism, or separate out ‘real’ from ‘unreal’ loyalties…” It sits between the claims of particular loves and moral universalism. It could therefore be called, “in both senses of the word, a partial cosmopolitanism.”

Appiah admits the very word “cosmopolitanism” is wince-inducing. It smacks of elitism, privilege, easy travel, and condescension. He nevertheless prefers it to “globalization,” “multiculturalism,” and “humanism” as a name for an ethic of attention to the human community at large. Each of the alternatives is too indeterminate, a “shapeshifter” that “can seem to encompass everything, and nothing.”

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85 Appiah, The Ethics of Identity. p. 222.


87 Globalization “once referred to a marketing strategy” and has become too vague. Multiculturalism “often designates the disease it purports to cure.” Humanism (addressed in “Cosmopolitan Patriots,” 94) is not pluralist – the wrong kind of universal.
cosmopolitan brings some baggage with him onto the jet, but at least you can inspect the bag. And Appiah rather likes much of what he finds there.\footnote{Appiah, \textit{Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers}. p. xiii.}

Cosmopolitanism’s baggage includes the Stoic history Nussbaum engages, but Appiah looks further back: to the Cynics who coined the term as a “paradoxical” formulation: the “self-conscious oxymoron”\footnote{Appiah, \textit{The Ethics of Identity}. p. 217.} of a \textit{citizen} of the universe. The irony is important. The Cynical cosmopolitan knows there cannot be a \textit{polis} that includes the entire \textit{kosmos}.\footnote{Not even Marcus Aurelius, emperor of the world, referred to a world state. He really meant to think of himself as a citizen of the universe. Ibid. p. 218.} He nonetheless deploys the cosmopolitan imaginary to interrogate the “conventional view that every civilized person belong(s) to a community among communities.” This ironic moment suggests “cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge.” It poses but does not (quite) answer the problem of cross-border relations. It is aware of its necessary partiality, in terms of preference as well as limit, and committed to interrogating preference and limit within itself.\footnote{Appiah, \textit{Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers}. pp. xiv - xvii.}

Partial cosmopolitan draws together two “strands” of the cosmopolitan tradition: first, the idea that our obligations “stretch beyond … kith and kind (and) the more formal ties of a shared citizenship” and second, the idea that “we takes seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives.” The two strands coexist in productive tension: universalist and particularist/pluralist impulses mutually supporting one another.
therefore rejects the misanthropy of the earnestly detached, those whose universal love correlates to diminished kinship or fellow-feeling.\textsuperscript{92} Partial cosmopolitans should therefore pattern themselves not on Aurelius the emperor or Rousseau the deadbeat dad but on George Eliot’s \textit{Daniel Deronda}: “no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with noble partiality which is man’s best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical … the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance…” At the same time, they should seek “as wide an instruction and sympathy as possible (and) to understand other points of view.”\textsuperscript{93}

Appiah’s “partial” cosmopolitanism thus departs somewhat from its jet-setting image. The cosmopolitan challenge is not to take a truly universal view but to find ways of living in the already common condition of “multiple and overlapping” attachments and the near-universal fact of human migration. Appiah emphasizes the everydayness of cross-border interactions and migrations, arguing the “urge to migrate is no less ‘natural’ than the urge to settle.” Yes, Walzer was right that most actual migrations proceed from necessity rather than autonomous will,\textsuperscript{94} but Appiah sees this as no objection. Just as work and settling are often driven by need and hunger, so is migration:

(M)ost of those who have learned the languages and customs of other places haven’t done so out of mere curiosity … most were looking for food. Thoroughgoing ignorance about the ways of others is largely a

\textsuperscript{92} Appiah points to the famous case of Rousseau, the “lover of his kind, but a hater of his kindred” (in Burke’s apt phrase) who abandoned each of his children. Ibid. p. xvi.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid. pp. xvii-xviii.

\textsuperscript{94} Walzer, \textit{Spheres of Justice}. p. 38.
privilege of the powerful. The well-traveled polyglot is as likely to be among the worst off as among the best off … So cosmopolitanism shouldn’t be seen as some exalted attainment: it begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association.\(^95\)

Appiah also agrees with Walzer that “conversation” and “living together” involve common points of reference and shared experience. Like Walzer, he maintains that “even when we are constructing new and counternormative identities, it is the old and the normative that provide the language and the background.”(cp98) However, he understands the nature and extent of political and cultural sharing rather differently. In *Spheres*, Walzer held that political community brings us as close as possible to a world of shared meanings. For Appiah, “common culture” in the thick sense only rightly applies to a *tribal* ideal (and even in that case the ideal is likely a good distance from reality.) In our current political context, “the citizens of those large ‘imagined communities’ of modernity we call nations are not likely to be centered on a common culture of this sort.” In fact, “The notion that what has held the United States together historically over its great geographic range is a citizenry centered in a common culture is – to put it politely – not sociologically plausible.” Given the massive scale of the modern nation-state, “relations between citizens must, of necessity, be relations between strangers.” The dynamics at work in relations between strangers are therefore instructive for norms of citizenship as well as for cosmopolitanism.\(^96\)

\(^95\) Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. p. xix.

Voicing doubts about the notion that political deliberations must take up or assume a substantial set of common meanings, Appiah prefers to talk about “points of entry” to conversation across cultural or political difference. A conversation often begins as a single point of contact, not as a complex, multi-layered argument with transparent terms and conceptual frameworks. For cross-cultural conversation especially, the “points of entry … do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common.”

Nor do such conversations necessarily aim at fuller agreement (although that could be a welcome outcome facilitating further and deeper conversation). For cosmopolitan purposes, Appiah holds that “what makes conversation across boundaries worthwhile isn’t that we’re likely to come to a reasoned agreement about values (or) factual judgments.” Rather, cross-boundary conversations “begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie…” A good novel or movie can suspend disbelief and draw you into its narrative. You require no agreement on first principles. If you can engage the imagination and curiosity in this way, much of conversation’s goal is already achieved. For the “minimal” yet substantial standard of relatively peaceful coexistence, “(c)onversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that we get used to each other.”

Conversation as “living together” is, in a sense, its own end.

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98 Consider the example of the pro-choice and pro-life leaders in Boston, who met in secret over several years, and even befriended one another. Each side became more entrenched in its beliefs, but less harsh in its rhetoric toward the other side. In a context where polarized conflict had led to murder, this is a
Anticipating the sorts of concerns Nussbaum faced about the “thinness” or “weakness” of conversation without thick, shared meanings, Appiah stresses that “engagement with strangers is always going to be,” in practice, “engagement with particular strangers; and the warmth that comes from shared identity will often be available” in the form of religious commitment, political alignment, artistic interest, or a shared trade.  

“The great lesson of anthropology is that when the stranger is no longer imaginary but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him (but) you can make sense of each other in the end.” That small truth counts for a great deal in daily lived practice. We do well to account for it in theory as well.  

What accounts, then,” he asks rhetorically, “for the thick, black line we draw between these strangers and (in a convenient shorthand of Michael Walzer’s) ‘political strangers,’ those who are not members of our polity?”  

As far as the “community of

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100 I once spent an afternoon trading ox-driving techniques with an elderly Sikh man who worked at a convenience store down the street from the folk school where I was an intern. He walked by every day and, with great interest, watched me and my fellow interns work several yoke of oxen at diverse farm tasks. One day, he came out into the field to show us how he would drive the cattle – not from the side with gestures and vocal commands, but from the back with reigns. We would not pierce the ox’s nose to attach the reigns, so he made do with a rope tied to each horn – enjoying rather little success. We showed him how we used body position to communicate with the oxen, the vocal commands and tiny crop both playing a support role. In this context, gesture and a shared understanding of the work at hand provided the entry point as well as the limits to conversation.


102 “Our increasing interconnectedness – and our growing awareness of it – has not, of course, made us into denizens of a single community … Everyone knows you cannot have face-to-face relations with six billion people. But you cannot have face-to-face relations with ten million or a million or a hundred thousand people … and we humans have long had a practice in identifying, in nations, cities, and towns, with groups on this grander scale.” Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*. pp. 216-217.
aspiration and argument” is concerned, Appiah clearly recognizes no justification for such a “thick” black line. On the other hand, as an advocate of patriotism and smaller loyalties he does offer several reasons to exercise “partial” commitment to one’s own polity. As it turns out, when we look back to conversations within political community, a sort of thin, gray line appears “essential.”

For Appiah, the possibility of cross-cultural conversation and life together that neither assumes nor produces broad agreement on values should give pause to theories of public reason or even deliberative democracy that stress conditions or outcomes of agreement. However, when conversation in its broadest sense takes place among members of the same polity, Appiah does think a somewhat greater sharing is required, although it falls well short of the “thick” or “common” culture prized by communitarians:

What I think we really need is not citizens centered on a common culture, but citizens **committed** to common institutions, to the conditions necessary for a common life … We can live together (in a given) arrangement **provided we all are committed** to it for our different reasons.\(^{103}\)

What Appiah describes here bears careful elucidation. Although he asks a bit more of citizens than he does of the merely coexisting, I believe we can read in his account something quite distinct from Rawls’ overlapping consensus: a “hopeful” and conditional rather than an “exhausted and circumstantial” rendering of the *modus vivendi*.\(^ {104}\)

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\(^{103}\) Appiah, ”Cosmopolitan Patriots.” p. 102.

I look to another discussion, where Appiah tries to gain traction on the intuition that we can distinguish “thick” duties to co-members of some particular community from “thin” duties to humanity as a whole by distinguishing moral from ethical duties.\textsuperscript{105} Here, he suggests that we commonly elide many important differences when we use words like “duty,” “responsibility,” and “obligation” interchangeably. He argues for a “zone of ‘ought,’” of ethical obligation, that is intermediate between the wholly required and the wholly supererogatory.” Short of universal morality, the role- or identity-bound zone of the ethical is not strictly voluntary (voluntarism is a tempting way to dissolve the tension, but not ultimately satisfactory.) Rather, “where morality requires compliance, ethics calls for it.” Requirement connotes governance and punishment. Calling suggests vocation, a duty assumed (it possesses a voluntary aspect or moment at least) but not extracted or enforceable by legal penalty. Still, such a calling can be powerful, exerting its own power and penalties through shame, esteem, praise, blame, and other social pressures.\textsuperscript{106}

Since Appiah speaks of our “commitment” rather than our “obligation” or “loyalty” to common institutions, we might (remembering Shklar) infer that he has the “call” in mind here. Insofar as we can speak of political society’s “need” or “requirement” for such commitments, we will be speaking in terms of conditions of possibility rather than exactable, enforceable obligation. We “can live together … provided we are all committed…” is a statement of fact more than a prescription, and it

\textsuperscript{105} He draws on Margalit, who in turns draws on Walzer.

\textsuperscript{106} Appiah, \textit{The Ethics of Identity}. pp. 230-235.
alone gives all of us good reason to continually call one another to recommit ourselves to the conditions that enable our peaceable living together.

What Appiah enjoins is therefore at once minimal and maximal, restrained and exacting:

we do not need to insist that all of our fellow citizens be cosmopolitans, or patriots, or loyal to the nation; we need them only to share the political culture of the state. And sharing political culture does not require them to be centered on it, and certainly does not require them to be centered on a culture wider than the political. What is essential is only – though this is, in fact, a great deal – that all of us share respect for the political culture of liberalism and the constitutional order it entails.107

To many who resist patriotic appeals, the idea that they should “share the political culture of the state” will sound eminently objectionable. I include myself here – I can hardly read this passage without cringing. But I also think Appiah himself provides us with at least two ways out of this impasse. The first we have already encountered in the difference between enforceable requirement and the vocational zone of the ethical. The second is to take seriously his commitment to the pluralism of reasons and to inquire how far his own reasons for commitment to the state’s political culture may affect the conditions of our living together under a given “arrangement.”

Appiah’s reference to a “political culture of the state” reflects his own conception of patriotism as devotion to the institutions and principles that make up the state, rather

107 Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots." p. 107. See also the introduction to Cosmopolitanism, where he argues that “we can’t expect everyone to become cosmopolitan,” but that we should nevertheless recognize and insist that rejecting cosmopolitan, cross-border relations under our increasingly globalized conditions is in many ways harder than embracing them. A similar approach may apply to liberalism within the polity as well. Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. p. xx.
than to the nation, the *ethnos*, or some other entity standing behind the state. He advances this notion in the context of a debate with Nussbaum and others about the moral relevance of the nation-state, which he always de-hyphenates into the nation on one hand and the state on the other. The former he considers a principle of deep sharing and intent (along the lines of Renan or Walzer) that is *ethically* important (in terms of particular duties to which members and participants may be called) but *morally* arbitrary. States, by contrast, matter morally as a matter of fact, “because they are both necessary to so many modern human purposes and because they have so great a potential for abuse.” This is not to say that states are inherently moral, but rather that any moral account or project must take their influence, their capacities, and their dangers into account. You cannot, as certain cosmopolitans *and* anti-patriots might like to do, simply ignore the state as a morally relevant unit. You may not want to engage in its business, but you must *engage* it.

One important outcome of this understanding of public institutions is that (in the spirit of Weil) we should regard the political community (or, for Appiah, the state) to which the culture corresponds as an intermediate good rather than an end in itself.

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108 I am, for the purpose of interpreting Appiah, deploying here his own distinction between the moral and the ethical. I do not thereby endorse it generally. As he describes it in this essay, the nation is “arbitrary” in the sense that it is “dependent upon will or pleasure.” It does factor into moral considerations insofar as it is a good desired by humans, “for the same reason that football and opera” matter. “States, on the other hand, matter morally intrinsically…” (cp 97)

109 Appiah follows his defense of the state’s intrinsic moral importance with a call for cosmopolitan patriots to “defend not just the state, but the county, the town, the street, the business, the craft, the profession, and the family, as communities—that are appropriate spheres of moral concern.” Unfortunately, the intrinsic moral importance of these other “spheres” remains undertheorized, here and elsewhere. I will discuss below how Appiah’s relative deference to the state hampers his understanding of vocational duties for non-state actors. Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots." p. 97.
Unfortunately, Appiah is somewhat ambiguous on this point. From a Weilian perspective, his claim that the “French and American revolutions invented a form of patriotism that allows us to love our country as the embodiment of principles, as a means to the attainment of moral ends” advances two incompatible principles. No entity can be both a “means to attaining moral ends” and “the embodiment” of a set of principles.\textsuperscript{110}

The latter phrase is closer to Renan than to Weil, and it risks turning the country, state, or whatever potential patrie into a self-referential, “delimited” area. I do not want to hinge too much on one word: if Appiah could restate this claim in terms of “instantiation” or “enactment” rather than “embodiment” of principles, that would go a long way toward resolving the apparent problem. On the whole though, apart from the somewhat too-enthusiastic notion of “embodied principles,” Appiah does regard the political community as a means for life together,\textsuperscript{111} a good “in itself” rather than “for itself.”

Therefore, although I do object to Appiah’s characterization of the state and the relative weight it carries in his vision of patriotism (for reasons I elaborate below), I do not think his “reasons” represent a fundamental threat to the conditions of our living together. If Appiah is right that we can live together with dissimilar commitments, each for our own reasons, it may be fair to consider his notion of a “political culture of the

\textsuperscript{110} I would add that patriotism tied too closely to existing state institutions and their boundaries seems not to account for patriotism’s meaning in the American Revolution, the French Resistance, or even the Ghanaian independence movements to which Appiah points as models of patriotism. Patriotism in those contexts was mobilized against the existing state’s contours and its definition of the country.

\textsuperscript{111} Consider the rather Weilian language from “Cosmopolitan Patriots”: “No liberal should say ‘my country right or wrong,’ because liberalism involves a set of political principles that a state can fail to realize; and the liberal will have no special loyalty to an illiberal state, because liberals value people over collectivities.” Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots." p. 93.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid. p. 101.
state” one of those reasons that does not pose a barrier to “conversation” between Appiah and a relative non-statist like myself. I regard common “commitment to the conditions of common life” as more central to his vision than commitment to the institutions and political culture of the state as such, even though he and I implicitly disagree about the conditions of common life, and almost certainly about the conditions under which we come to know those conditions. This arrangement may sound unsatisfying or unstable at best, but I agree with Appiah that cross-cultural communication is hard. One of the hallmarks of a good conversation is the attempt to listen to one other, to sit together for a while and see what makes sense. Generous engagements with strangers (and with those strangers among our fellows, friends, and family!) require at least partial, momentary suspensions of judgment, while efforts to translate from one tongue, vocabulary, or comprehensive worldview into another are as necessary and inescapable as they are suspect and fraught. The modus vivendi is therefore no small achievement.

Still, while Appiah’s account of the state does not as a reason for commitment present a fundamental threat to the conditions of our living together, it may yet as a theoretical framework hinder our ability to understand, defend, and promote those conditions. Or rather, not his account of the state alone but the interaction between it and the “ethical” vs. “moral” distinction may limit our pursuit of conversation (in all its senses) within and (particularly) across the borders of the polity.

113 I would argue that we have far less perfect knowledge of the conditions of our living together than Appiah’s account of the state implies. A good reason to call rather than actively require in this area is the fact that the dominant political culture cannot claim a monopoly on the tekne of coexistence. The great “value” of conversation and engagements with strangers is continual discovery and education about such matters.
Appiah’s ethical zone “encompasses what you must do as an embedded self with thick relations to others.” The moral, by contrast, applies to the “well-ordered society, the just state, the ideal of liberal governance.” He stresses that this does not render the ethical “voluntary.” No fixed dichotomy between governance/coercion and market/voluntary realms of activity can capture all the kinds of ethical relation that fall short of fully obligatory and enforceable justice – the family providing an archetypical case. Nor are the moral and the ethical firmly and finally distinguishable one from another. Although we can analyze them into ideal types, they have many points of contact and relative weights between them will vary.  

The turn to “membership” and “partiality” in the ethical is meant to address concerns about the unrealistic demands of a radically comprehensive cosmopolitan ethic, exemplified for Appiah by Peter Unger’s conclusion that those of us who are relatively well-off in the global scheme of things should immediately send almost all our money to UNICEF or OXFAM.  

Aside from the predictable bad consequences of such an approach, even on a utilitarian account, Appiah sets out to justify philosophically our deep intuition that something is wrong with Unger’s maxim.  

114 “Moral obligations must discipline ethical ones. Yet this is not to say that the obligations of universal morality must always get priority to ethical obligations…Only the most unattractive sort of moralism would automatically reproach you” for breaking the speed limit to fulfill a duty of deep ethical importance.” Appiah, The Ethics of Identity. p. 233.  

115 Personified in Appiah by Unger’s “prescriptive altruism.”  

Appiah thus takes up “the emergency principle” (closely related to Walzer’s “principle of mutual aid” and likewise indebted to Cicero’s conception of the duty to mutual aid):

If you are in the best position to prevent something really awful, and it won’t cost you much to do so, do it.117

The principle applies generally without having to ask everyone to adopt extraordinary duties toward unknown others, to sacrifice the ethical zone for those “closer by” to the universal realm of the moral. Like Walzer, Appiah is relatively unsure where to draw the line between the principle’s enforceability and an actor’s freedom from it. How far do I have to be from a drowning child before I can be absolved of responsibility? How great a cost must I incur to outweigh my duty to preventative action? The principle itself cannot answer these questions, but this is no objection: “figuring out moral principles … is hard … One reason life is full of hard decisions is precisely that it’s not easy to identify single principles” that can always tell you what to do.”118 Such principles serve as guides demanding judgment and interpretation. Better to embrace and recognize them as such than to force counter-intuitive and even morally grotesque conclusions out of a distorted dedication to logical coherence.

On the other hand, in keeping with his emphasis on conversational curiosity, Appiah holds that the cosmopolitan response to the circumstances of emergency is to go beyond emergency aid and ask the question “why” did this happen, and how might I and my community be implicated in the disaster? The “call” of emergency circumstances to

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117 Ibid. p. 162.

118 Ibid. p. 162.
take up political inquiry and response draws us beyond the enforceable obligations of the
Emergency Principle. Beyond the moment of urgent need, emergencies call us to
judgment and political action on behalf of basic human needs. 119

Appiah imposes some “constraints” on acceptable political answers to the
questions raised in the aftermath of emergency:

1) “the primary mechanism” for meeting basic needs and entitlements “remains
the nation-state,” given the historical, relative efficacy of nation-states as tools
for securing welfare and security and the absence of any obvious, superior
alternative agent (Appiah shares the concerns of others about the global state)

2) “our obligation” as individuals “is not to carry the whole burden alone.”
Obligations to strangers cannot “require us to abandon our own lives. They
entail, as Adam Smith saw, clearheadedness, not heroism.”

3) “basic obligations (for others) must be consistent with our being … partial (in
the other sense) to those closest to us” in terms of relationships both “chosen
and unchosen.” 120

If we confine our attention to enforceable obligations, I can concede each of these
constraints. Still, I think these principles result in an insufficient understanding of the
actual means by which needs are met, emergencies answered, and the conditions of life
together obtained and sustained. Vocation and obligation are more mutually implicated

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120 Ibid. pp. 163-165, 173.
than this picture allows. We cannot, in effect, confine our attention to enforceable obligations alone without misreading the situation.

The trouble stems from Appiah’s confinement of the ethical zone (along with “calling” or vocation) to communities and networks of which we are already members, to those “lives nearer by,” while the universal zone of “moral” obligation and governance extends beyond to include political strangers. As Appiah knows, vocation is not so easily separated from moral duty and obligation. Among other things, vocation calls us to enter into reciprocal relations with as-yet unknown others. Consider Appiah’s formulation of the Emergency Principle: the “position” of the actor in question is assumed. But how did our hypothetical Samaritan actor arrive in that position? Can there be an obligation to enter into ethical relations, to put oneself in a position to respond to the calls of needy others? Or is positioning oneself in this way vocational from the beginning? And is it fair to extract greater obligations from those who enter into closer proximity with needy others, whether intentionally or incidentally?

To Appiah’s insight that the ethical call operates in a terrain “intermediate between the wholly required and the wholly supererogatory,” we must add a parallel observation about a zone between the practically requisite and the discretionary. Appiah expresses some doubt about Avishai Margalit’s position that there is “no obligation … to be engaged in ethical relations.” “The picture of choice” in membership “can be misleading,” he points out, because “opting out is not always possible, or even feasible.” We enter (and are born) into many ethical relationships irrespective of choice. And while these may be variously contingent or negotiable, the basic embeddedness of our lives (our
essence as “political animals”) is not. It seems then that while ethical relationships take the form of negotiable, particular connections and memberships, ethical relatedness itself is a constitutive condition of human life.¹²¹

Moreover, as I have already indicated, I regard a good political Order (both progressive and unstable) as highly dependent on actors who take up a “duty to defend order” – however that might unfold in practice. I share Appiah’s aversion to mandated heroism, but as a matter of practice I think he dismisses heroism’s role too quickly. Moments of something like heroism may well be necessary from some people sometimes, as they take on vocations akin to Weil’s threshold position. Such actors may also strategically choose affinities and proximities to reconfigure present patterns of proximity, distance, care, and sacrifice (from joining a resistance movement to declaring sanctuary for displaced persons). Rightly Appiah says “I cannot be required to derail my life to take up the slack” for others who ignore various calls to the ethical.¹²² Yet, the most precious achievements of social movements for democracy and equality do seem to require among their conditions that some lives be derailed from the choices autonomous agents might make under ideal conditions.¹²³

In his zeal to protect us all from derailing, Appiah (like Nussbaum) assigns the role of “primary mechanism” for “ensuring” good treatment to the nation-state. I do not

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¹²² Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. p. 165.

¹²³ Perhaps smuggling threatened peoples into safety and freedom, for example, is the most fulfilling life plan for a certain number of individuals, but I think to view such activities as expressions of individual autonomy (in the same way that, perhaps, a career in music might be viewed) seriously misreads the situation. Appiah also thinks it would be a mistake to read a career in music this way – many such pursuits are felt as vocation by their devotees.
deny that the state is a crucial tool among the many tools available to agents of order, but it seems to me imprudent to assign it such a central place. Appiah concludes, “If we accept the cosmopolitan challenge, we will tell our representatives that we want them to remember those (political) strangers.”(c174) This is both necessary and woefully inadequate. Is this really the measure of the challenge before us as citizens of polities in the world?

No, we cannot and should not universally reroute our fellows into the cause of justice. But we can recognize the crucial importance—indeed, the necessity—of those “agents of order” whose lives are so habituated and arranged as to be more easily pulled by chance encounters out of their private projects into unexpected collaborations with previously unknown others. The non-universalizable nature of the vocation is no objection: we readily acknowledge other particular, non-generalizable roles as necessary to the polity or to humanity as a whole: the soldier, the teacher, the politician... Why not the threshold attendant, the agent of order, and the ironic citizen of the world?125

124 Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. p. 174. Appiah also characterizes international human rights thusly: “we embody our concern for strangers in human rights law and … urge our government to enforce it…” Here again is the language of “embodiment,” applied before to the state and here to the law. There are too few actual bodies in this understanding of embodied concern. Would it better to say that law codifies and expresses concern? Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. p. 82.

125 It would be helpful to think through other roles we might say the polity requires but which it cannot require of any specific individual: in addition to teachers, soldiers, politicians, judges, attorneys, and journalists, we should consider sanitation workers, farmers, parents, ministers, doctors, etc. In each case, depending on the nature of the vocation, requirement would function differently (for example: It has commonly been easier to require soldiering than other duties. Is this because soldiers are more vital than doctors or teachers? Or is some less salutary effect at work here?) If such a study is to avoid excessive idealization (that is, attend to corruptibility, incompleteness, and peccability of our institutions) it should include activists, whistleblowers, organizers, and other such agents of order as necessary roles we cannot require under threat of penalty.
Walzer Crosses the Border

So I turn back, somewhat unexpectedly, to Michael Walzer – the theorist of bounded community – whose most recent essays on humanitarian politics amount to a compelling call for vocational, cross-border action as a central condition of global justice. He arrives there by paths he had only sketched out in *Spheres*: the principle of Mutual Aid, the cross-border relations that “govern” our decisions, and responsibility for injuries beyond the boundaries of the polity. By engaging further with these and other principles that appeared at the margins of his earlier work, Walzer “opens out” onto zones of thought and action that run beyond and cut through the Spheres of Justice he first described. Along the way, he reconceives political agency, splitting “we who decide” via the sovereign state into “many agents” operating at “many sites” – echoing Weil’s conservationist ecology of enrooting *milieux*.

Paradoxically, it may be Walzer’s very attentiveness to boundaries that is most responsible for his shift from a thick, communitarian account of duties within borders to a vocational cross-border theory. In *Spheres*, he contrasted the good of bounded polity to two varieties of dystopian cosmopolis. In the first, a world where “no one was a member” anywhere, the principle of Mutual Aid would reign supreme: “Justice would be *nothing more than* non-coercion, good faith, and Good Samaritanism.” Barring a sudden increase in human capacities for spontaneous peace and charity, this “world without walls” would soon devolve into “a thousand petty fortresses.” At the other extreme was a world in which “everyone ‘belonged’ to a single global state.” Here, a kind of “global socialism” operates. Thick duties and shared meanings apply universally across
humanity. Given the diversity of human conceptions of justice and the good life, we can only imagine such a world coming into existence (in the foreseeable future) through deeply coercive means.\textsuperscript{126}

Walzer did not set out in \textit{Spheres} to address global justice, but he has frequently been invited or challenged by others to defend the implications of his theory for global justice. In “Governing the Globe” (2000) he attempts to chart a course between the two cosmopolitan dystopias: the Scylla of global tyranny and the Charybdis of global anarchy. Bounded community, he maintains, helps us negotiate these twin dangers by providing means of escape (you can, at least conceivably, cross from the domain of one power into another) and by keeping the state of nature at bay (boundedness banishes anarchy to the international stage, the razing of walls allows it to penetrate back into the civil condition).

But now, Walzer fleshes out several other requirements of the best achievable global order. Through a complex thought experiment that starts at each dystopic extreme and works its way toward the center of a continuum, he arrives at a vision of global structures at once more centralized and more pluralized than those currently in existence.\textsuperscript{127} Taking up again the turn to “civil society” occasioned by the revolutions in Eastern Europe,\textsuperscript{128} Walzer now considers essential “a wide range of civic associations for

\textsuperscript{126} Walzer, \textit{Spheres of Justice}. pp. 34, 39.

\textsuperscript{127} His approach cannot quite be reduced to a golden mean, because he does not simply strike a balance between extremes. Rather, he works inward from flattened, inadequate extremes, adding as he goes details that are missing at either end of the continuum in a reflective equilibrium between ideal types and historical experience.

mutual aid, human rights advocacy,” and so on, all with “centers distinct from the centers of particular states,” and which “operate across state borders and recruit activists and supporters without reference to nationality.” Like its domestic forerunners, the global civil society is not sufficient alone: such associations commonly “run after problems; they react to crises; their ability to anticipate, plan, and prevent lags far behind that of the state.”129 At the same time, however, these plural foci are “engaged in activities of the sort that governments also ought to be engaged in – and where governmental engagement is more effective when it is seconded (or even initiated) by citizen volunteers.”130

As corollary to a Kantian federation of republics, Walzer calls for “a set of alternative centers” to the federation “and an increasingly dense web of social ties that cross state boundaries” but which “would never constitute a single center” themselves. “(T)hey would always represent multiple sources of political energy; they would always be diversely focused.” The proliferation of centers calls to mind Weil’s description of “progressive associations not forming wheels within the wheels,” distinct from but “in touch with” the state and also spilling across into inter- and trans-national associations.

Further, Walzer describes plural sites of agency as refuge for political action: “We need

129 Most such organizations concede this, although when they do so they often describe an idealized state, calling actually existing states to be more effective and more timely than they often are. I would argue that civil associations like those Walzer describes are frequently more responsive and effective than the states in which they operate, at least with regard to certain tasks, populations, or regions, or else they would not be so necessary. The question is whether states have the potential to outperform civil associations. If so, civil associations rightly call on the state to do its job, and they rightly undertake to carry out its work in the meantime. See: Liam Mahony and Luis Enrique Eguren, Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights (Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1997). Also see Dr. James Orbinski’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech on behalf of MSF: “Ours is an Uncontented Action,” collected in Bortolotti, Hope in Hell.

many agents, many arenas of activity and decision. Political values have to be defended in different places so that failure here can be a spur to action there, and success there a model for imitation here.” He thus surpasses his understanding in *Thick and Thin* of the value of cross-border solidarity and engagements, recognizing not just the likelihood but the vital importance of alien influence and feedback from the objects to the agents of solidarity.

As Walzer increasingly appreciates cross-border engagements, he also comes to see the current “level of participation in international civil society” as “much too low … Few people are sufficiently interested.” How to generate such interest? We require a global civil society, but we have no means to require it of others (and probably good reasons not to do so). For the moment, Walzer simply observes that we can “strengthen global pluralism only by using it.” 131

Much more recently, in “Achieving Global and Local Justice” (2011), Walzer observes that vast inequalities and extreme vulnerabilities across the globe “cry out for a globally applicable critique.” Responding to this cry is a requirement for global justice: “What we require is minimalist in character: the recognition of people like ourselves, concern for their suffering, a few widely shared moral principles.” Like Appiah’s “ethical zone,” which dwells between the wholly required and wholly supererogatory, Walzer describes a zone of humanitarian activity, which “includes charitable efforts” and “is driven in the first instance by the feelings of individual men and women, but its scope, its organizational complexity, the policy debates it necessarily involves, and the fact that

131 Ibid.
we can’t give it up make it the work of the just and not only of the good.” We can therefore second Appiah’s opposition to the “rule of prescriptive altruism” only if at the same time we follow Walzer in acknowledging our deep dependence on those “volunteers” who heed the call to think and work beyond enforceable obligation.  

He also takes up a more serious engagement with responsibility for effects across borders: beyond the principle of mutual aid (now rephrased as “whoever can, should”), we will find that often we share some degree of responsibility (often through those leaders who claim to act on our behalves, or from the corporations and merchants who serve our needs and appetites) for many occurrences of “political plunder, economic disruption, civil war, and mass flight” around the globe. Now, “(t)he relevant moral principle is as obvious … as the principle of mutual aid: You must help repair the injuries to other people that you have helped to cause…” Cosmopolitan curiosity in response to the cry opens us onto responsibilities and duties of which we may have been ignorant but not innocent. It draws us into the knowledge of relationships we already have.

Finally, upon further consideration of our need for humanitarian workers, Walzer interrogates the boundary between justice and benevolence, duty and charity. In “On

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132 Hints of Walzer’s appreciation for such a role come through in Spheres’ discussion of the importance to a just state of the “gift relationship,” the sympathetic interest of citizens in their fellows which exceeds but also to establishes justice, and which redeems charity by looking beyond “relief” to “communal integration” and justice. “One might think of the gift relationship as a kind of politics, like the vote, the petition, and the demonstration, the gift is a way of giving concrete meaning to the union of citizens.”(Spheres, 94) It is unclear, however, why the gift relationship should be confined to the union of citizens, unless we accept Spheres’ premise that the union itself is of “primary” rather than intermediate importance. If “communal integration” is one function of the gift relationship, might it not spill over official, received boundaries, via “actual contacts” and “connections” with political strangers, thereby setting up the conditions for global justice and non-tyrannical governance? This is, in fact, the direction Walzer has taken in his most recent work.

Humanitarianism: Is Helping Others Charity, or Duty, or Both?” he argues that humanitarian work straddles these binaries. It is “a gift that we have to give.” Wherever it is most effective (and least given to unintentional, negative effects), humanitarian work is “governed by the rules of justice and prudence, not kindess,” putting it closer to political work than to charity. It “is a political project (that) carries risks that are not usually associated with charitable work,” and it can therefore “go very badly when its organizers are not politically informed, committed to justice, and ready to make prudential calculations.”

Still, the label “humanitarian” reflects our belief that such work should be nobly-motivated, a partial effort to mitigate the disastrous effects of charity gone wrong. Walzer still holds that, for these and other reasons, such efforts “cannot be legally enforced. But this raises the question: “what if the fellow-feeling doesn’t flow freely?” Must we, as a political society or a community of aspiration and argument, simply throw up our hands? Can we look to more than a “campaign” to foment the needed energies required by humanitarian projects? Walzer thinks so: “we must search” he says “for more informal ways of pressing people into humanitarian service and evaluating and criticizing what they do (and don't do).” Between coercion and voluntarism, we must recognize and support vocational duties across boundaries – with the understanding that those who take up this vocation will draw the rest of us, as they address us from their posts at and across borders, ever further into relationships with distant others.

134 Michael Walzer, "On Humanitarianism: Is Helping Others Charity, or Duty, or Both?," Foreign Affairs 90, no. 4 (2011).
Walzer harkens back to the Jewish diaspora tradition of tzedakah, an “obligatory charity” system of welfare provision, developed by a stateless people. Where the state is absent, he suggests, “charity and justice come two in one.” This applies to diaspora, refugees, and – to a degree – to every one of us while conditions of anarchy obtain in our relationships to humans across (and to zones within) our borders. Those we commonly recognize as refugees are therefore stateless twice over: once with regard to the states that exist, a second time with regard to the international anarchy that prevails over the whole human species. Their double jeopardy brings into stark relief a universal political condition: the mutual implication of justice and charity and our need to map out a middle terrain of politico-humanitarian vocation between them.135

As a repeat Century of the Refugee is already underway, and as the sustainability (or even the fulfillment) of the Westphalian ideal appears increasingly unlikely, we cannot settle for accounts of national citizenship in unitary publics that deny refugees and asylum-seekers the “right to be successful.” On the other hand, a thoroughly cosmopolitan extension of order threatens to deny refugees not only the right but the possibility of success. As refugees know too well, citizenship’s protections – however vital – are imperfect at best, regardless of the scale. Cosmopolitan patriots must therefore go migratory in response to the call beyond border that, in Walzer’s words, “invites us to choose to do what we are absolutely bound to do.”

135 Ibid.
Chapter Four: Practices of Attention

Scarry's Concern

In response to the early, cosmopolitan Nussbaum and other theorists of cross-border engagement, Elaine Scarry has raised serious concerns about our ability to respond to calls beyond enforceable, legal obligations. She worries that the vocational approach “entail(s) a rejection of constitutionalism in favor of unanchored good will.” Bringing back the institutional telos of earlier globalisms, she argues that only the force of law and its penalties can reign in the worst abuses: torture, extrajudicial killing, or genocide. Scarry concedes that we must employ both generous imaginings and the force of law, but she chooses to put her heavy foot in the latter. “I weight my comments to the sphere of constitutional design, because if this solution is in place then the spontaneous acts of individuals have a chance of producing generous outcomes. By contrast, if constitutional solutions to foreignness are not in place, then the daily practice of spontaneous largesse will have little effect, and all our conversations about otherness will be idle.”¹ For Scarry, vocational actions depend on legal guarantees: secure legal space first, and generous imaginings may follow.²

Scarry argues that “Constitutions are needed to uphold cosmopolitan values” and that violations of human rights are “caused” by the “difficulty of imagining others.” But

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² Nussbaum current description of the “threshold” of duties more or less takes up Scarry’s view. Nussbaum, Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationalist, Species Membership. p. 310.
if Scarry is right about failures of the imagination, a similar analysis should apply to failures of the law as well. Violence attends the failure of Constitutional or legal regimes as well as failures of moral imagination. Moreover, when Constitutional protections do fail, precious little may remain to fill the gap. Under these conditions, the imagination figures prominently among the tools remaining to citizens and aliens. Is the difficulty of creating and sustaining a good Constitution responsible for crimes against constitutionally-protected rights?

Further, as Weil observed in the context of the Resistance, neglect for moral and political imagination likely contributes to constitutional failure. Of what use are laws where political will is lacking to respect and enforce them? How powerful is a Constitution that protects refugees if the citizen population regards refugees as scary, dangerous, undeserving outsiders? How does a constitutional change come about, except through the prolonged efforts of those practicing apparently “spontaneous largesse” (which is always anything but spontaneous) in anticipation of (and for the sake of) constitutional improvement? Scarry herself is among the best chroniclers of the devastating effects of blocked imagination. Her Body in Pain portrays the torturer as unable to see his victim, as so warped in his reasoning that he “denies pain as pain” and “reads it as power.” Looking at this person in this situation, Scarry apparently concludes that the imagination is so weak, or so corrupt, that working on it is nearly useless. Better to go find someone to come in with a truncheon and stop matters.3

3 Scarry.
The problem, of course, is how to get the truncheon-carrier to care. How will the truncheon-carrier recognize what is taking place when he walks into the torture chamber, and how will he know whom to beat, how hard, and when to stop? Once more, we are confronted with the nasty problem of the imagination. Instead of circumventing it, we meet it in a new person. Moreover, where torture occurs, a truncheon-carrying representative of the law is as likely as not to be the torturer, or at least to have enabled the torturer and his failure of imagination. The torturer reads pain as power for himself but also for his state, his military, and his police. If the torturer’s rack leads Scarry to despair of the moral imagination, should reading the legal memos of John Yoo lead to similar despair regarding the power of law?

By reading “difficulty” alone as the “cause” of violence, Scarry portrays the imagination as less powerful than it is and renders more difficult the critique of violence and political oppression. She concludes that imagination must be regarded as a merely desirable rather than necessary condition of justice (while the difficulty of creating and maintaining good constitutions never comes up). If we take the difficulties of moral imagination as a challenge rather than a flaw, however, we might come up with more fruitful lines of inquiry into the problematic of Scarry’s torturer.

Weil shares Scarry’s concern about the relative weakness of “generous imaginings.” Nevertheless, she maintains they are necessary. More than helpful supplements to legal order, generous imaginings are necessary conditions of legal order, especially at the moment of its establishment or reestablishment. Addressing herself to
the FFO, Weil reminds her readers that democratic institutions, as crucial as they are, owe their existence to imaginative work, and that addressing their dissolution and their failure calls for agents of progressive, unstable Order to take up the imaginative task once more:

(T)he Republic, universal suffrage, an independent trade union movement, are completely indispensable in France. But this is infinitely far from being sufficient, since these things had lost their significance for us and have only begun arousing interest again a long time after they had been destroyed… We shall not find freedom, equality and fraternity without a renewal of our forms of life, a creativity within the social fabric, an eruption of new inventions.

Beyond a mere restoration of the status quo ante, Weil calls for ongoing, intersubjective discovery of the conditions and characteristics of just and reciprocal relations. From her vantage point, constitutional order appears weak, insufficient, and finally dependent on the imagination, which is itself weak and insufficient.

For no sooner does Weil establish the need for imaginative “eruption” than she observes, “we seem to be too exhausted for such an eruption.” The “we” here is as ambiguous as the nature of the exhaustion. France’s restoration and reinvention will begin with the unreciprocated, generous actions of those courageous few who first take up the task. How can she ask those who already resist the occupation to think beyond the liberation of their homeland to yet another monumental and perhaps even more difficult

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4 Remember that Weil understands “Order” as progressive instability and increasing compatibility among needs and obligations. According to this understanding, “order” may be lacking under conditions more conservative observers would consider ordered, leaving a bigger role in Weil’s account for imagination and creative renewal.

5 Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" p. 8.
task? How can she expect those who currently collaborate with the occupiers to find now the energy they presumably lacked when they “opened their hands and let their patrie fall to the ground” in 1939?

It appears that Imagination remains, like Order, equally insufficient and necessary, while intellectual, moral, and physical “exhaustions” constantly threaten to undo both – a challenge particularly but not uniquely evident in Weil’s circumstances. How might political actors find the capacity and energy to imagine, re-imagine, establish and tend to unstable, progressive Order? To what degree is exhaustion itself a negotiable factor, a matter of perceptual “seeming” rather than an accurate assessment of actual energy reserves? Can a shift in perspective or directed attention yield resources to work through and beyond the myriad apparent exhaustions that plague all actors in adverse times, and especially the most vulnerable?

Weil approaches such questions under the rubric of “Attention.” Although one of the most generative and inspiring concepts in Weil’s writing, I find that it is also one of the most incomplete – and Weil’s continually dissatisfied circling of the problem attests to that fact. I begin this chapter with a reading of Weil as an unsatisfied experimenter in attention, whose dissatisfaction stems in part from the nature of her subject (a justified dissatisfaction) but also from shortcomings in her account. Her writings certainly contribute to an understanding of the question, but I ultimately find that her political projects (especially her proposals for the “nursing squad” and the “receiving

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For a discussion of the perpetual threat of exhaustion to democracy, see: David Kyuman Kim and Cornel West, "Democracy, the Catastrophic, and Courage: A Conversation with Cornel West and David Kyuman Kim," *Theory and Event* 12, no. 4 (2009).
organization,” addressed in chapter 1 and briefly revisited here) offer more hopeful resources to tackle the insufficiency of attention and “generous imaginings.”

From Weil’s experiments in embodied Attention, I turn to examine certain imagination-enhancing “devices” (a la Nussbaum)\(^7\) that have emerged from human rights advocacy and humanitarian activism in the Americas. The projects I consider straddle and negotiate the tension between human rights advocacy and non-partisan humanitarianism. Such efforts, I suggest, enact a Weilian threshold sensibility and commitment to refuge. Moreover, I find that they illuminate beyond Weilian or cosmopolitan formulations the practiced traits of the “patriotism of compassion” and of “partial cosmopolitanism.”

I consider three cases: “Accompaniment” projects that monitor human rights abuses in Guatemala; the American Sanctuary Movement’s refugee-smuggling network in the 1980s; and the contemporary humanitarian patrols of No More Deaths (NMD) and the Samaritans along the U.S.-Mexico border. Both NMD and the Samaritans (the two work in close partnership) are direct descendants of the Sanctuary movement, providing an example of how such efforts endure and evolve over time. I draw on historical and analytical treatments, but much of my theorization of these movements comes from direct involvement: I have volunteered as an “accompainer” in Guatemala and as a first-aid patroller with No More Deaths. I hereby renounce any pretensions to facile impartiality. Like Appiah’s vision of cosmopolitanism, my vision here is “partial” in both senses.\(^8\)

\(^7\) Nussbaum, *For Love of Country.?* p. xiii.

\(^8\) Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers.?* p. xvii.
The importance of recognizing and wrestling with partiality head-on is among the most important lessons these movements teach.

But the modes of politico-humanitarianism I address in this chapter provide more than mere instantiations or examples of Weilian patriotism or partial cosmopolitanism. Rather, their own bodies of theory and histories of practice bring to these theoretical discourses some unique and crucial insights. In their cross-border, grassroots modes of action, each of these projects straddles dichotomies between cosmopolitan detachment and communitarian commitment. Each consistently recognizes and wrestles with the limits of its own capacity and understanding, and therefore commits to limited sites, moments, and types of action. With varying degrees of success, each movement maintains collaboration among disparate groups, discipline among its members, and a threshold sensibility with regard to official and state apparatuses. However, the configurations of commitment in each project are contingent. Limiting and focusing effort does not preclude shifting emphases or encouraging others to commit their own efforts elsewhere. A close examination of these “devices” of moral imagination provides some crucial lessons to would-be Weilian patriots or partial cosmopolitans, and it may push those with cosmopolitan, cross-border leanings in somewhat different rhetorical, theoretical, and practical directions.

The Problem of Attention

In *Roots*, Weil argues that a “diffuse, nomadic” patriotism offers the best hope for an effective Resistance that might establish conditions for justice without recapitulating
Imperial urges. Free to migrate from the nation-state to other sites of concern, the new patriotism requires a different motive force. Not pride that “is by its nature exclusive, non-transferable” but wide-ranging compassion “without hindrance” forms its affective register. However, Weil offers relatively little discussion in *Roots* of compassion itself. Her account is significantly hampered by this lack: the re-conception of patriotism leans heavily on a power that she had previously portrayed as incredibly weak.\(^9\)

The anti-colonial essays in particular express deep skepticism about compassion’s strength. Like the frustrated prose of the abolitionists in antebellum U.S., Weil’s anti-colonial rhetoric lies somewhere between “scorching irony” and “convincing argument,”\(^10\) a furious impatience with the stunted imaginations of fellow-citizens to whom, seeing no alternative, she continues to appeal.\(^11\) She felt compassion’s impotence acutely when the Left-coalition Popular Front government abandoned its anti-colonial platform and began to repress the same colonial labor movements that had been its political allies during its rise to power:\(^12\)

> In the end we…who belong to the Popular Alliance…have the same mentality as the bourgeoisie. The middle classes are capable of being

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\(^11\) See the deeply sarcastic “Blood is Flowing in Tunisia” and “Those Throbbing Limbs of the Fatherland,” in Weil, *Simone Weil on Colonialism*.

\(^12\) Blum outlawed the *Etoile Nord-Africaine*, an Algerian nationalist and workers’ organization that belonged to his own Popular Alliance. Roubaud had noted in 1931 that the conservative French government maintained the myth of the happy colonial subject by blaming uprisings on Communist agitators. Under the Popular Front in 1937, Weil reported that unrest was blamed on Hitler and Franco. The Left vs. Right dichotomy apparent in both cases nicely illustrates the dynamic of opposition Weil described in “Guerre”.
moved by a beggar they pass in the street; it’s just that the distance (between their neighborhoods and those of the poor) exceeds the capacity of their imagination, just as the distance between Paris and Saigon exceeds ours.\textsuperscript{13}

For Weil to argue the necessity or importance of an unlikely or weak power is not surprising in itself. Remember, Weil holds that “the mere fact that we exist and that we want something different … constitutes for us a reason for hoping” when routes to justice remain otherwise obscure.\textsuperscript{14} Further, \textit{Roots} demonstrates only that the new conception of patriotism \textit{requires} compassion, not that compassion itself is likely or easy. Our willingness to depend on and cultivate compassion will depend largely on how attractive or compelling we find Weil’s re-vision of patriotism. If we agree that patriotism needs to be reconceived then, according to Weil’s way of thinking, we should simply “struggle all the harder” to cultivate compassion, however weak we find it initially.\textsuperscript{15}

Eventually, however, Weil would come to see the imagination as limited not only by distance but by another, less tractable problem: a fundamental lack of curiosity that stemmed from France’s self-image. She held that

\begin{quote}
the French are so convinced of their own generosity that they do not seek to be informed on the evils that far-off populations suffer through them… Generosity hardly ever extends in any people as far as making an effort to discover the injustices committed in their name … The propaganda of a few can provide but a feeble remedy.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Weil, \textit{Simone Weil on Colonialism}. p. 42

\textsuperscript{14} Weil, \textit{Oppression and Liberty}. pp. 21-22.

\textsuperscript{15} Nussbaum ends up in a similar place at the Conclusion of \textit{Frontiers}, in need of compassion, unsure how to mobilize, generate, or extend it.

\textsuperscript{16} Weil, \textit{Simone Weil on Colonialism}. pp. 67-68.
Weil finally gave up on fostering “a movement of opinion in the colonizing nation against the appalling injustices” of Empire. Still, she preferred a feeble remedy to none, and (as I described in chapter 1) recast her anticolonial propaganda in terms of national security rather than justice. “Information,” she came to believe with regard to the colonial question, “only has a chance of effecting change when it appeals to self-interest.” She would have to get her compatriots’ attention before she could even begin to consider the potency of their compassion. Worse, their very confidence in their compassion supplied the main obstacle to their Attention!

The greatest trouble with the patriotism of compassion, therefore, is not that Weil overlooks compassion’s weakness but that she attributes to it an especially problematic strength. She describes compassion as “able, without hindrance, to cross frontiers (and) extend itself over all countries in misfortune.” This description risks becoming just the sort of comforting fiction she normally abjures. Compassion that travels without hindrance sounds suspiciously similar to a generosity without any sense of its limitations or its potentially disastrous effects. In short, if compassion does turn out to be as strong a force as Weil says it might be, it might be more dangerous than good. Rather than diffuse and nomadic, a patriotism inspired by compassion “without hindrance” could easily turn imperial, reinforcing the very danger Weil would avoid. Read in light of her anti-colonial writings, Roots’ invocation of a compassion “without hindrance” appears willfully naïve at best.

Weil must have been aware of the incongruity, insofar as her writings before and after Roots continually struggle with the problem of the weak or unreceptive imagination,
the problem of “attention” which precedes that of compassion. Attention is among the most discussed and most difficult concepts in Weil’s vocabulary. Depending on her task at hand, it names directed effort in studies,\textsuperscript{17} meditative prayer,\textsuperscript{18} radical openness to an unspecified other,\textsuperscript{19} or a “spirit” that motivates justice toward particular persons (Personality).\textsuperscript{20} She often relates each of these dimensions to the others, in ways that are sometimes unclear or undertheorized. A complete account would take me too far astray of my purpose here. Suffice to say at the outset that wherever she invokes it, Attention differs at least this much from unhindered compassion: it names a moment of “non-action” prior to action, a temporary suspension of one’s own judgment and energy so that the Other (particularly an afflicted other) may be felt precisely as hindrance and barrier to the Self.

In the “Poem of Force,” Weil contemplates the effect that human presences exert on one another, and how that effect diminishes and may even disappear under the most extreme inequality:

Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power that belongs to him alone, that is, the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk around, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor.

\textsuperscript{17} “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in Weil, \textit{Waiting for God}. pp. 57-65.

\textsuperscript{18} “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” in Ibid. pp. 128-129.


\textsuperscript{20} “Human Personality,” in Ibid. p. 63.
But this indefinable influence that the presence of another human being has on us is not exercised by men whom a moment of impatience can deprive of life, who can die before before even thought has a chance to pass sentence on them. In their presence, people move about as if they were not there...Pushed, they fall. Fallen, they lie down, unless chance gives somebody the idea of raising them up again...\(^21\)

The victorious do not “see their relations with other human beings as a kind of balance between unequal amounts of force.” Between conqueror and conquered, armed and disarmed, torturer and tortured, there is no “hindrance” beyond the physical, material resistance that a human body has in common with any all matter. Killing turns a human being into a thing, but “the force which does not kill” can just as effectively “turn a human being into a stone.” With this pivotal difference: it might be possible to raise up these stones.\(^22\)

In “Are We Struggling for Justice?” (the essay’s title a question posed to the Gaullist Resistance leadership), Weil considers how to reestablish a “kind of balance” (even an unequal one) in human relations starting not from idealized conditions but from actual, intractable, deep inequalities. Right at the start she reveals the two texts that inform all her studies in Attention: the Athenian characterization of justice at Melos (as

\(^{21}\) “Beyond a certain degree of inequality in the relations of men of unequal strength, the weaker passes into the state of matter and loses his personality.” Weil, *Waiting for God*. p. 87.


Remember that for Weil affliction names a condition beyond oppression or suffering. That “a kind of balance” may obtain among unequal human beings reminds us that it will often be possible for the weak or the marginalized to offer some resistance to the dominant. That sort of interplay between unequal forces was crucial to Weil’s definition of Order. But Weil does regard affliction as a widespread, pressing problem. Without giving up on the resistance of the weak (the power of the powerless?), she nevertheless maintains that we must confront and work through the existence, even the ubiquity, of those currently unable to resist, thanks to others’ perception of them and their perception of themselves.
related by Thucydides) and the very different view of justice advanced in Plato’s *Symposium*. The Athenians infamously justified brutal reprisals at Melos by arguing that justice did not apply to their circumstances: “The examination of what is just is carried out only when there is equal necessity on each side. Where there is one who is strong and one who is weak, the possible is done by the first and accepted by the second… (and) by a necessity of nature each one always commands where he has the power to do so.”

For Weil, these “two sentences” express “the whole of Realpolitik.” She contrasts “justice only among equals” to the discussion of love and justice in the *Symposium*:

“‘Love’, says Plato, ‘neither does nor suffers injustice (while) all consent to obey Love in everything. Where there is agreement by mutual consent there is justice, say the laws of the royal city’.”

Whenever Weil invokes “love” and “justice” in the same breath, which is often, she refers to this passage and its emphasis on mutual consent.

Although Weil rejects the Athenian position as a definition of justice, she accepts it as an account of how relations among unequals typically take place – that is, as a description of “nature” or “necessity.” Taking the Melian dialogue’s view of natural relations together with the Symposium’s priority for mutual consent, she describes a problematic in which the perceptions (or lack thereof) of the powerful pose a barrier to consent’s very possibility:

When there is equal strength on both sides one seeks the conditions for mutual consent. When someone does not have the capacity to refuse one is not going to look for a way of obtaining his consent. Thus only those

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23 Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?.” p. 1.

24 Recall Walzer’s observation that, for the stateless, Justice and Charity merge into one. Walzer, "On Humanitarianism: Is Helping Others Charity, or Duty, or Both?."
conditions which correspond to objective necessities are examined. The consent of matter is all that one seeks.

In other words, 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. In relation to the action and to the one who performs it, he has no existence.\(^{25}\)

The problem of Attention is therefore antecedent to the problem of justice, at least where affliction is concerned. The “conditions of mutual consent” must obtain before we can seek consent. Where conditions of radical inequality obtain instead, some prior reconciliation must take place. Assuming that one or more factors in the potential “balance of human relations” are so afflicted as to be wholly non-resistant (except as physical matter), the only hope for an establishment of justice may be for the powerful to do that which they seem unable to do: to perceive and to feel the powerless as a hindrance to their own will, against the workings of “nature” and “necessity.”

Thus Weil often speaks of a “supernatural” virtue at work when one takes notice of and regards the non-resistant as resistant.\(^{26}\) In “Are We Struggling for Justice?,” she choose the language of “madness,” since “it would be absurd and mad for anyone at all to impose upon himself the necessity of seeking consent where there is no power of refusal.” Nevertheless, she argues that conditions like those endured by the French

\(^{25}\) Weil, “Are We Struggling for Justice?.” p. 2.

\(^{26}\) “And the afflicted are nearly always deaf to one another; and each of them, constrained by the general indifference, strives by means of self-delusion to become deaf to his own self. Only by the supernatural working of grace can a soul pass through its own annihilation to the place where alone it can get the sort of Attention which can attend to the truth and to affliction. It is the same Attention which listens to both of them. The name of this pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love. Weil, Simone Weil: An Anthology. pp. 71-72.
Resistance constitute “moments when only the madness of love is reasonable.” If an otherwise “mad” and unaccountable faculty appears necessary, it remains only to determine how to cultivate this particular form of madness among as many people as possible. Qualifying the insensitivity she attributes to the powerful, Weil suggests that the residual “power of the powerless” may foment a cross-cutting conspiracy of “mad,” contagious, unaccountable attention to the other:

The great mass of people who lack the power to grant or refuse consent do not, collectively, have the slightest chance of raising themselves to the possession of such a power without some complicity within the ranks of those in command. But there is no such complicity except amongst the mad. And the more madness there is below, the more chances there are that it will appear by contagion at the top.

To the extent to which at any given time there is some madness of love amongst men (above and below), to that extent there is some possibility of change in the direction of justice: and no further.

Attention as a “mad love” that makes possible mutual consent should not be confused with the universal obligation to respect all of humanity, which I described in chapter two, although it serves that end. Attention goes beyond the universal respect demanded of and directed toward all, approaching un-selfing deference. Reciprocal relations of “mutual consent” – justice - remain the ideal, but under the conditions of radical inequality that occur across human experience, Attention rendered by those with capacity to those

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27 Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" p. 3.

28 One possible implication, which Weil does not adequately develop, is that by exceeding exhaustion and taking on the role of attentive subject, the “objectively” weak and marginalized may become subjectively powerful…especially when undertaken in collaboration and community with others both strong and weak…

29 Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?" p. 5.
without opens the way. In Weil’s estimation of the human condition, this makes
Attention a matter of crucial importance. She rarely thinks beyond the given reality in
which the relatively powerful and privileged learns to attend to the marginalized and
weak, to the “stammering vagrant”, by learning to experience the weak as a person – as
an obstacle in the world to his own power. From her position, inequality and violence
so far dominate that to speak of reciprocal attention at the beginning would be grossly
premature. That is why those few who undertake vocationally the disciplines of attention
are so important: because they, in decidedly non-reciprocal renderings of attention and
indirect respect to their peers, make satisfaction of needs more possible, while
prophetically gesturing toward the reciprocal relations that characterize justice. Attention
plays midwife to justice amid actually existing (if not omnipresent) contexts of injustice,
as opposed to a purely hypothetical blank slate.

It is because Weil reads extreme inequality in this way that she insists on a
moment of attentive stillness before tending to or acting on behalf of the afflicted. When
“affliction” or “misfortune” runs so deep that it robs the other of “all significance, in
everybody’s eyes including his own,” then “whether he is an object of ill usage or of
charity he will in either case be treated as a cipher, as one item among many others in the
statistics of a certain type of affliction. So both good treatment and bad treatment will
have the same effect of compelling him to remain anonymous. They are two forms of the
same offense.”

31 Against the urgency to act now, which threatens to reify radical

30 Weil, Simone Weil: An Anthology. p. 52.

affliction…misfortune itself becomes a man’s whole existence and in every other respect he loses all
inequality, attention’s patience strives for enough balance between power and non-power to allow for justice, rather than charity and dependence, to emerge.32

Although Weil understood “the madness of love” as a precondition for justice, she experienced considerable difficulty describing and enacting the processes and intermediate steps whereby a “mad few” individuals could establish justice in community or institutional settings.33 It is no mistake that Weil chooses the metaphor of “contagion”34 when she describes how “mad love” will spread, a process she imagines as largely unintentional. When Weil turns to community-based practices of attention, she often falls back on the capacities of a few key individuals and rather vague generalities. For example, she calls for “a regime in which public freedom of expression is characterized not so much by freedom as by an attentive silence in which this faint and inept cry can make itself heard; and finally, institutions (that) put power into the hands of men who are able and anxious to hear and understand.” She offers only the haziest

32 Compare Walzer on the Gift Relation, Walzer, Spheres of Justice. pp. 93-94.

33 See Weil’s too heroic reading of the Samaritan in Weil, Waiting for God. p. 92.

sketch of the mechanisms that would select and elevate the gifted, attentive few to power.35

Her own attempts to practice Attention highlight some of these shortcomings. In her year of factory work,36 Weil had exercised moral imagination by physically relocating to sites of concern and serving as a conduit of information to relevant, influential agents – in this case fellow intellectuals and middle-class leftists. She employed a similar strategy in Marseilles, where she found some 30,000 colonial subjects conscripted before the war from Southeast Asia to build munitions. The Vichy regime had moved them to Marseilles and housed in an unfinished, unheated prison. Upon learning of their situation, Weil began entering the prison facilities (without authorization) and befriending people inside. She reported the camp’s appalling conditions and corruption to a contact within the Vichy government, resulting in the camp commander’s transfer and a general improvement in conditions. Further, while she sought asylum and passage out of France for herself, she helped Nguyen Van Danh of the Red Cross secure the repatriation of these war workers. The pair also pressured the Vichy government to include colonial combatants in its prisoner of war negotiations with Germany.37

However admirable or even necessary, such efforts are subject to Weil’s own criticism of “charity” divorced from justice: they depend too much on the “whim” of an

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36 See Chapter 1, pages 29-30.

individual. This is not to denigrate the work on its own terms. Weil’s year in the factory bore unexpected fruit in her own relationship to Marxism and in its continuing influence on those who read and take seriously the issues raised by her notes. And the fact that Weil volunteered only unofficially and temporarily for the Red Cross does not diminish the very real impact her work had on the lives of the many refugees she helped to repatriate. Weil’s efforts to practice Attention suffer not so much from their limitations as from her insufficient sense of their limitations, of the freedom she reserved to herself and her lack of accountability to a broader community, including the objects of her Attention.

The major exception to this trend is the “receiving organization” Weil proposed for the Resistance, which I described at some length in chapter one but which bears revisiting here in the context of Attention as such. Weil regarded this project as a “mode of education for the pays” in which “the modalities themselves of action, and those of organizations created for the purposes of action” would form the people of France into a community capable of founding and governing itself, of giving itself the law. Crucially, Weil tells us her project would be “inadequate” and that “it cannot be otherwise.” An awareness of and attention to the limitations and inadequacies would facilitate rather than hamper the organization’s work.

Even here though, Weil resists intentional action in common. She insists that “the organization which coordinates actions” must “not (have) been formed artificially but …

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39 Ibid. p. 197.
grown up like a plant in the midst of day-to-day necessities, having at the same time been moulded with patient vigilance and with some particular good kept clearly in view.”

What should we make of this mixture of organic and artificial processes? Ruling out “artifice” seems to rule out intentional design, but “moulding” with “patient vigilance” in view of some “good” indicates the exact opposite. Weil’s ambivalence about the degree to which coordinated efforts should occur “naturally” or “intentionally” points to an ambivalence about capacities for Attention, whether they are unaccountable gifts in possession of only some individuals or whether they can be cultivated by institutions and practices. Weil seems so intent on maintaining Attention’s “miraculous” character that she overlooks opportunities to augment the frequency of its occurrence.

In the end, Weil’s account of Attention comes up short. The “madness of love” as precursor to justice depends too much on “miracles” without enough inquiry into the conditions under which they occur. Moreover, by collapsing love and justice into one another (rather than describing a close interaction between them, or naming – like Walzer – the specific conditions under which they come to occupy the same space), Weil asks too much of Attention, subsuming too many phenomena under its name: Attention as love names a stillness before action, but justice seems to require a certain kind of action that follows from the mutual consent love precedes and thence into indirect respect for the human by tending to the body and soul. If “mad love” is a synonym for attention, then love cannot also be a synonym for justice. In order to recognize a relationship between attention/love on the one hand and justice on the other, we must recognize them

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40 Ibid. p. 212.
as distinct moments rather than synonyms. This insufficiency in Weil’s account is distinct from the insufficiency of Attention itself, which points toward and enables but cannot alone achieve justice and “mutual consent.” Whether as generous imagining or as embodied practice, Attention can only ever be insufficient, “it cannot be otherwise.” The greatest limitation of Weil’s account is its relative lack of awareness of its limitations, both necessary and contingent.

In fairness to Weil, her main proposal for institutionally sustained Attention - the "receiving organization" she envisioned for deGaulle’s Free French - never became more than a proposal. Weil’s wariness and her stubbornness with regard to collective action are due in no small part to the fact that she often encountered recalcitrant authorities who had little attention for a young, ill, Jewish woman. Thus, although Weil understood the role of “actions and the modalities themselves of action” in political education, she did not benefit herself from such an education in politically active, institutionally sustained attention.

By contrast, human rights movements in the Americas from the 1980s through today have benefitted from decades of experience with organized action under adverse conditions. Like Weil’s receiving organization, these projects flesh out the form which “imagination-extending devices” might take, as well as the particulars of migratory patriotism and partial cosmopolitanism. I undertake in the following to elucidate the parallels and the dissonances between Weil’s efforts and those of cross-border activists, volunteers, and refugees in the Americas. The “congregationally sustained” efforts of these remarkable movements helpfully supplement the insufficiencies of Weil’s account.
(especially in self-awareness of insufficiency, a particular strength of these movements) and also help me to bring Weil’s insights to bear on political problems closer to home.

The Accompaniment Project

The strategy of "accompaniment" typically involves bringing citizens of “most-developed,” liberal-democratic nation-states to regions where basic human rights are routinely and openly violated. Less often, accompaniment efforts are directed at the developed world, for example short-term accompaniment of indigenous peoples in parts of Canada. Accompaniment differs from development or aid work in that the volunteer does not necessarily offer any particular expertise or skill beyond the capacity to monitor or observe conditions as they evolve with the aim of deterring human rights violations.

Mahoney and Eguren are former volunteers whose analytical account of accompaniment draws on both direct experience and scholarly research. They offer a concise description of the accompanier’s unique role:

The accompaniment volunteer is literally an embodiment of international human rights concern, a compelling and visible reminder to those using violence that it will not go unnoticed. The volunteers act essentially as unarmed bodyguards, often spending twenty-four hours a day with human rights workers, union leaders, peasant groups, and other popular organizations that face mortal danger from death squads and state forces.

The premise of accompaniment is that there will be an international response to whatever violence the volunteer witnesses. Behind such a response lies the implied threat of diplomatic and economic pressure – pressure that the sponsors of such violence may wish to avoid.41

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41 Mahony and Eguren. p. 1
Beyond deterrence, accompaniment projects often seek to encourage democratic or popular movements and organizations to pursue their activities without fear of reprisal. Volunteers may even do no more than contribute to the sense of baseline security that allows threatened populations to conduct daily life without paralyzing fear.

Finally, accompaniment includes an activist “awareness-raising” aspect with regard to the home country of the volunteer, particularly if (as between Central America and the United States) the volunteer’s home country is significantly involved in the region where abuses are taking place. Accompaniers are expected to “share the space of another and get to know it” so that they may effectively “sensitize the people of their own places to the workings of violence.”\(^{42}\) The volunteer is imagined as a communicative liaison to friends and family who, as citizens of a presumably powerful nation-state, can vote, agitate, boycott, petition, or take other actions on the basis of conveyed knowledge. A more formal relationship of the volunteer to church, civil, or government networks may facilitate these goals. The Guatemala Accompaniment Project (GAP), for example, encourages volunteers to arrange speaking tours through their congregations, and it requires them to carry letters of support from elected officials in Congress. Volunteers circulate periodic communiqués to friends and family networks as well as Congressional offices. Accompaniment therefore facilitates lobbying work and policy reform efforts, even though its specific practice prioritizes direct, “non-acting” action over political campaigning.

Accompaniment projects may cite as forerunners the Red Cross, the “freedom riders” of the 1960s, or the cadre of international journalists that travelled with Gandhi. But as a unique and conscious strategy with a more difficult relationship to “neutrality,” accompaniment developed out of the Central American conflicts of the 1980s. With an advance team of three volunteers on tourist visas, Peace Brigades International, an organization dedicated to non-violent direct actions in conflict areas, pioneered the technique of accompaniment to facilitate the recuperation of Guatemalan civil society during the small, unstable “democratic opening” of 1983. Almost concurrently, U.S. Church groups visiting Nicaragua on a fact-finding mission started Witness for Peace, a religiously-motivated accompaniment network. Accompaniment was most widespread and diverse in Guatemala, where volunteers still provide international monitoring presence to witnesses, lawyers, politicians, organizations, and returned refugees. Volunteer coordinating offices represent initiatives from the USA, Canada, Switzerland, and Spain, to name a few. Basque and Quebecois volunteer groups represent stateless nations.

The U.S.-based Guatemala Accompaniment Project is particularly instructive as an example of sophisticated organizing strategy and institutional flexibility. GAP, a coordination of grassroots accompaniment projects in several U.S. communities, grew out of efforts to accompany returning refugees in 1994. Guatemalan refugees living in Mexico had initiated and brought to fruition their own negotiations with the Guatemalan government. In addition to a right of return, they negotiated for the right to have

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43 Mahony and Eguren, pp. 2-5, 14-16.
international observers travel with them and then live in the new communities until the returnees felt secure in their new homes. On relatively short notice, solidarity networks, church organizations, and peace activists around the globe scrambled to provide bodies for the international accompaniment of a large-scale repatriation effort.\textsuperscript{44}

In time, the U.S.-based organizations consolidated their efforts under the auspices of GAP. GAP paired each returnee community in Guatemala with a sponsoring community in the United States. Sponsoring communities have included student organizations, neighborhood groups, congregations (in one case, the Church of the Bretheren, an entire denomination) or \textit{ad hoc} local communities of ex-volunteers formed specifically for the purpose. From the mid 90s until the early 2000s, GAP prioritized accompaniment of returned refugee communities, and maintained close ties between returnee/sponsoring-community pairs.\textsuperscript{45}

As Guatemala’s civil war receded further into the past, however, the human rights threat shifted from refugee villages back into more urban settings. Human rights lawyers, activists, and even judges became the primary targets of death threats, kidnappings, and other abuses. GAP and its member communities gradually shifted their emphasis in response, maintaining close relationships with some refugee communities (particularly those that were home to witnesses in suits against government actors) while closing down projects wherever refugees felt safe enough to stop inviting accompaniers back. In each case, GAP coordinators walked a fine line between respecting the returnees’ own

\textsuperscript{44} NISGUA, "Intro to G.A.P." http://www.nisgua.org/get_involved/join_gap/intro.asp (2009).

preferences and the risk of fostering long-term dependence on international presence. By 2006, when I returned to Guatemala for a short-term project accompanying witnesses to testify before an investigating Spanish judge, GAP had switched almost completely from community-based accompaniment of indigenous returnee communities to accompanying individual witnesses or human rights organizations. This work requires somewhat greater logistical facility, and so over the last several years GAP has collaborated more closely with and integrated itself into a penumbral coordination of accompaniment projects from around the globe, called ACOGUATE.

In each of its several iterations, accompaniment provides an excellent example of the sort of imagination-enhancing “device” for which Nussbaum calls. During the refugee return in particular, “the world was watching the refugees” – previously an almost invisible population – “in a way that no other Guatemalan population had ever been watched.” In fact, accompaniment magnifies the moral imagination along several trajectories. First, as in the case of the Return, accompaniment both generates and focuses international attention on populations that are often ignored or hidden. When successful, it extends the boundaries of “the international community…beyond governments, beyond the UN, beyond establishment humanitarian agencies and the existing human rights NGOs…(A)ccompaniment volunteers are a living bridge between the threatened activists and the outside world, and also between their own home communities and the reality of the global struggle for human rights.”

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46 Mahony and Eguren. p. 126

47 See for example Ibid. pp. 54, 49, and 56.

Proponents of accompaniment argue that its concrete, cross-border relationships help to “overcome the seemingly impossible challenge of human rights protection.” If so, it may also facilitate fellow-feeling and sympathy for distant others and political strangers. Accompaniment raises the possibility of a simultaneous extension and deepening of moral concern. In training sessions, long-time volunteers tell new recruits that when they “approach an alien experience, part of it will leave its marks in you.” Accompaniment thus offers an alternative to the jet-set, easy travel versions of cosmopolitanism imagined by its critics.

Additionally, accompaniment contributes to the imaginative capacities of political actors it supports. It opens political space for those accompanied by enhancing security (or the feeling of security) just enough to let them to imagine and enact new political possibilities. As one sympathetic editorialist put it in a Guatemalan newspaper:

In Guatemala, we are utopian...Utopian because we believe that the presence, the body of a foreigner beside our own will ensure that our lives are respected...We are utopian because the hundreds of leaders and workers for social change can’t possibly have as many human shields as they need. This observer recognizes that the tangible, measurable protective power of accompaniment may be severely limited, but he distinguishes those limitations from the symbolic, affective power accompaniment has in the imaginations of “utopian” political

49 Ibid. p. 257.

50 Rice.

actors around the country. From the perspective of long-term staffers and volunteers, “Accompaniment volunteers experience a rare privilege of standing at the side of (Guatemalan actors who) do the impossible every day.”\textsuperscript{52} If accompaniment augments constricted political space for subject populations, it also provides a political education to those privileged volunteers who learn not to know too well the limits of the possible.

Finally, accompaniment enhances imagination and one’s sense of possibility in ways somewhat different from those political theorists usually mean when we speak of “imagination” and “possibility.” As a deterrent strategy, accompaniment enhances the capacity of potential oppressors, government actors, and paramilitaries to imagine unfamiliar negative consequences of their actions. Put more simply, again in the language of a training session: “we (volunteers) are also a threat.”\textsuperscript{53} The presence of international bodies in the middle of violent repression raises the specter of negative press, lost trade relationships, economic boycotts or soured diplomatic relations, which together can constitute “a threat of negative consequences sufficient to prevent the repressive actions of aggressive actors.”\textsuperscript{54} Fear as well as hope is a product of imagination.

These differing trajectories of accompaniment’s imagination-enhancement raise the issue of “partiality” in Appiah’s first sense: as preferential intervention. “All

\textsuperscript{52} Mahony and Eguren. pp. 256-7.

\textsuperscript{53} Rice.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
accompaniment is *partial* to those it protects.*55 It enhances the political power of some and restricts the latitude of others. In assessing accompaniment as a wedge opening political space in oppressive political conditions, Mahoney and Eguren note that it is often difficult to distinguish … between nonpartisanship and *impartiality*. Most humanitarian organizations affirm a partiality for the poor, the suffering, and the marginalized while maintaining a nonpartisan position with respect to the armed parties in conflict. Semantically, the words nonpartisanship and impartiality are almost identical, but the distinction in practice is essential…Categories such as the poor, the suffering, and those in need are criteria that cross boundaries of specific political conflicts. To be partial but nonpartisan, then, is to say, ‘We will be at your side in the face of injustice and suffering, but we will not *take sides against* those you define as enemies’.56

The partiality of accompaniment became especially clear during confrontations between military patrols and returned refugee communities in Guatemala. These confrontations resulted in part from returnees’ inaccurate belief that the Return Accords prevented soldiers from patrolling through their new settlements.57 The Guatemalan military, meanwhile, provoked returnee communities with shows of force in and over (helicopter flights) their newly acquired lands. In one confrontation, accompaniment volunteers witnessed returned refugees, survivors of brutality at the army’s hands, behave in a


56 Mahony and Eguren. p. 236

57 Prohibiting soldiers from entering resettled refugee communities was an early casualty among the planks of the Return Accords, but it was such an important element in the minds of many people that belief in its adoption long persisted among the general population. In 2003, I had a conversation with members of the Public Prosecutor’s Office in Guatemala who swore that the Return Accords did in fact prohibit military patrols through resettlements.
“violently provocative” fashion, kicking and abusing army personnel. The officer in charge managed to diffuse the situation non-violently, despite the requests of some enlisted men for permission to fire on their unarmed assailants. Mahoney and Eguren note, “accompaniment did not protect the soldiers from this assault. It may even have emboldened the returnees to express their anger,” or even occasioned the commander’s restraint toward persons who had before been targets of mass killings by his army.\textsuperscript{58} Because of its deterrent objectives, accompaniment’s effects are often difficult to judge. It is clear, however, that accompaniment typically favors the unarmed over the armed, and the citizen or subject over the government.\textsuperscript{59}

My own experience as an accompanier in Guatemala confirmed this principle. In 2003, I regularly accompanied returnee witnesses to court to testify against soldiers who had committed a massacre in their community. The soldiers were tried as a group (with the commanding officer singled out somewhat), and it was difficult to establish beyond a certain degree who had and who had not fired on the unarmed population.\textsuperscript{60} By 2003, the case was on its third retrial – attacks and threats had resulted in two previous mistrials, but the political climate had changed sufficiently for prosecutions of military abuses to seem plausible if not easy. The public prosecutor in charge of the case requested the death penalty for the soldiers. Aside from GAP’s and my own opposition to the death

\textsuperscript{58} Mahony and Eguren. p. 143

\textsuperscript{59} G.A.P.’s guidelines allow it to accompany government officials regardless of party affiliation, although G.A.P. has declined to accompany those who also employ an armed bodyguard.

\textsuperscript{60} That the commander had shot a young child point-blank on the way out of town was quite well established. Whether some soldiers had refused to fire on the crowd (and whether one in particular had shouted for his fellows to “stop firing”) was more difficult to ascertain.

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penalty, I harbored serious doubts about the shared responsibility of each individual soldier for the massacre, as well as the relative benefits of prosecuting low-ranking regulars rather than the officers who had ordered this provocative show of force in the first place. As an accompanier, however, my role-specific obligation to support those testifying against the soldiers rendered me complicit in a possible execution. I could voice my concerns in reports and communiqués for an audience in the U.S., but I did not feel I could directly resist the application of the death penalty to these men in Guatemala. (As it turned out, the unlikely death penalty was never applied. The soldiers were found guilty and given time in prison. I have mixed feelings on the matter, which I regard as an appropriate response to most executions of justice.)

In light of these limitations, accompaniment fails the test of strictly universal cosmopolitanism (or “humanism” according to Appiah’s earlier classification scheme). Not only does it lack the impartiality that is supposed to characterize law, but it depends on and strategically deploys the inequalities among nation-states, assuming that the governments of Guatemala or Nicaragua will respond to imperatives issued by their more powerful neighbors (and even patrons) in the U.S., Canada, or Europe. Thus, although the volunteers cross international boundaries and learn to sympathize and even identify with persons who belong to other polities, they continue to act (and rely on their status) as citizens of their own nation-states.

The other side of this dynamic is the reluctance of accompaniment organizations to participate in Guatemalan or other local politics. The reluctance is both tactical and ideological. Peace Brigades cautions its Guatemala volunteers against taking too active a
role in commenting on or influencing Guatemalan affairs beyond the protection of basic human rights:

We come as outsiders, strangers, and stay for only a relatively short time. It is not up to us to define either the struggle or the means of struggle. We are trying to help protect the space that the Guatemalan people have opened up to work for freedom; we are not here to tell them how to do it.  

Note the reference to “the Guatemalan people.” Many (but certainly not all) accompaniment volunteers are self-identified cosmopolitans, radicals, or anarchists inclined to resist invocations of a unitary “people” in their own political societies. But for accompaniment projects, their assessment of their own power position as North Americans or Europeans in Central America (as well as of their limited abilities or limited time of residence in Guatemala) requires setting aside (at least for the sake and duration of the role-specific obligations of accompaniment) the question of whether there is such a thing as “the Guatemalan people” and their own critique of national sovereignty. Thus, for many volunteers, accompaniment means provisionally accepting the fact of the nation-state’s existence or the fact of certain legal regimes and doing what one can within the limits of the accompaniment relation. Such limitations may chafe cosmopolitan, internationalist, radical political commitments. At the same time, they help cosmopolitan, internationalist, radical practices avoid missionary, neo-imperial, or culturally chauvinistic deformations.  

For Mahoney and Eguren, “the accompaniment

61 PBI letter to prospective volunteers. Quoted in Mahony and Eguren. p. 57

62 Conversely, accompanying witnesses in the genocide cases (one initiated by a Spanish judge claiming universal jurisdiction, another moving through the Inter-American court) puts some volunteers in close proximity to a project that undermines the sovereignty of the nation-state (explicitly, in the minds of some proponents of the genocide charges).
movement’s steadfast recognition that the local activists must be the protagonists in their own search for solutions is something that some of the more establishment humanitarian interventions could learn from.63

Accompaniment’s history as a movement in response to urgency and danger has rendered it a school of pragmatic judgment in the application of idealistic principles. As a device for extending the imagination and paying attention to the marginalized, it emphasizes the bodily presence of intermediaries who volunteer to stand, for a time, alongside hopeful actors in another polity. Accompaniment’s self-limitation, its emphasis on presence rather than action, is also its greatest strength. On a spectrum between Attention as inactive, self-suspending regard and Attention as activity tending toward justice, accompaniment falls well toward the former end. It does so partly out of its recognition of the intractable power differential between volunteers and those they accompany, whose subjection or exposure results from constraint rather than choice. The selective, strategic unselfing of accompaniment opens the way for more just, more equitable relations among the powerful and the less-powerful to begin to develop. To recognize, along with the Guatemalan columnist, the “utopian” character of accompaniment is to acknowledge at once its power and its profound limitations. To quote the Executive Director of MSF, a project of very much the same spirit, “Ours is not a contented action.” It remains both incomplete and hungry.64

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63 Mahony and Eguren. p. 246.

64 Bortolotti. p. 291.
The Sanctuary Movement

Like accompaniment projects, the Sanctuary Movement arose in the early 1980s, although it responded to a somewhat different set of problems. While accompaniment applies international pressure on governments to encourage compliance with international human rights norms, Sanctuary focused on the refugees fleeing the Central American wars and seeking asylum in the U.S. where – despite federal asylum laws and the strength of refugee claims – officials regularly denied asylum and sent countless persons back to die or “disappear” in their home countries.  

Sanctuary volunteers, most of them Church members mobilizing their congregations, started out helping asylum-seekers navigate the complex and often hostile U.S. immigration system. In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration actively supported oppressive regimes and paramilitaries throughout Central America, all the while claiming that these represented “democratic” resistance to Left-wing movements and governments in the region. In order to justify its policies, the administration had to deny the existence of severe repression, torture, and genocide under the governments it supported. Throughout the refugee crisis, therefore, the American government falsely attributed the influx of Central American refugees to economic causes rather than political violence. On the basis of this institutional assumption, immigrants from certain

65 Space prevents me from addressing at length the Mexican Sanctuary movement and the status of Central American refugees in Mexico during these years. Although many secured asylum, their position could be precarious. Guatemalan incursions into Southern Mexico were sometimes overlooked by Mexican authorities, while immigration officials took a hard line (less so than in the U.S.) on anyone who could conceivably be construed as an “economic” rather than a political refugee. Furthermore, the Mexican Catholic Church’s involvement in sanctuary was complicated by its official status, which limited its public criticism of the Mexican government but also put it in a position to perform even more direct action (and incur greater risks) on behalf of Central American refugees.
countries were ruled “illegal aliens” before they could submit claims for political asylum. Participants in the nascent Sanctuary movement soon realized that helping refugees navigate official channels only hastened their deportation back to conditions of extreme danger. In response, they began developing an underground railroad to smuggle refugees out of immediate danger and into the protection of church communities that declared themselves “sanctuaries” from the misguided (and, in Sanctuary’s view, unlawful) enforcement efforts of duly constituted authorities.66

Convincing American churches to take this risky, difficult, and arguably illegal action required serious exercises in the extension of moral imagination. According to participant-chroniclers Golden and McConnell, “The sanctuary movement was born from an encounter of North Americans and Central Americans – not around a conference table but on the road, in the desert, along the barbed wire of border crossings.”67 Mission trips to Latin America provided much of the impetus: church members who asked Guatemalan or Nicaraguan co-religionists how they could help repeatedly heard a variation of the following answer: “Stop your government from sending guns that kill my people.”68 Public testimonies in which Latin American parishioners shared with U.S. congregations the truth of violence in their home countries swayed some North Americans to offer an incomplete but much needed emergency asylum. Generally, churches with Central American members or ties to particular communities in Central America responded more

68 Ibid. p. 27
quickly than those with no ties to the region. Using very different language than accompaniment-scholars Mahoney and Eguren, Golden and McConnell compare Sanctuary work to God’s promise to Moses:

‘I will be with you.’ That is the basis of the relationship of solidarity. It is not paternalism or pity; it is working shoulder to shoulder…As one Central American refugee put it: Solidarity is total identification with the suffering people.

The language of “total identification” clearly differs from accompaniment’s reflective sense of itself as a combination of proximity and distance, partiality and non-partisanship, a moral jiu-jitsu that deploys global inequality against itself. As we will see, however, at least some in the Sanctuary movement eventually developed a subtler sense of their work’s limitations, largely thanks to the intervention and resistance of those it smuggled into safety.

In addition to the theology of solidarity with the suffering people, Sanctuary volunteers used an imaginative device especially familiar to political theorists: they looked to the past for models, guidance, inspiration, and warning signs. While accompaniment projects commonly referred to the Red Cross and the Freedom Rides as their heritage, participants in Sanctuary compared their efforts to Monasteries smuggling

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69 Contrast, for example, the U.S. churches that supported dictator Rios Montt during the 1980s in Guatemala. Because the Catholic Church opposed him, Montt invited evangelical missionaries to convert Guatemalan civilians forced to live in his “model villages”. These predominately white churches had little knowledge or understanding of the situation in Latin America. Most took for granted Reagan’s anti-communist rhetoric. A former Spanish teacher of mine had been housekeeper to an evangelical missionary family during this time. Although the family lived in Guatemala, they had constructed a miniature compound to live in. Within their walls northern-style buildings, English language instruction, and a prominent American flag all insulated the family from the culture without. Their relationship to native Guatemalans was unidirectional - proximity alone clearly does not suffice to animate the moral imagination.

70 Golden and McConnell. p. 188.
of Jews from the Holocaust, to Andre Trocme’s safe haven in Le Chambon under Vichy France,\textsuperscript{71} and most frequently to the Underground Railroad that moved black slaves to freedom in Northern states in direct violation of the Fugitive Slave Act.\textsuperscript{72}

The Underground Railroad in particular shed light on the problem of Sanctuary’s questionable legality. Many Sanctuary workers regarded smuggling war refugees into the United States as an act of civil disobedience. When facing prosecution or arrest, they compared themselves to the abolitionists, Harriet Tubman, and Henry David Thoreau, individuals who invoked a “higher law” against the shortcomings of the law of men. By contrast, many other volunteers (including the lawyers representing Sanctuary churches and volunteers in court) maintained that the movement’s activities were wholly consistent with worldly law 	extit{as written}. This line of reasoning attributed any unlawfulness to the federal government, which violated its own immigration statutes when it turned away asylum seekers without regard for the merits of their claims.\textsuperscript{73} However, the approach depended on a set of facts which the government vehemently denied, leading to the absurd situation in which volunteers were assured they were “not breaking the law, but…could get up to fifteen years in prison!”\textsuperscript{74} Eventually, despite fears of appearing


\textsuperscript{72} Golden and McConnell. p. 15

\textsuperscript{73} A further wrinkle: many volunteers claimed a mixture of religious freedom and religious duty to justify themselves. At once a first amendment defense and an invocation of higher law in keeping with Thoreau-King tradition [which, of course, requires sitting in jail, not trying to get out of it] – a messy mix unlikely to hold up in court in any case…).

\textsuperscript{74} Golden and McConnell. pp. 162-179.
“too political,” the movement was forced to argue the facts of its case. Prosecutions and arrests simply hampered its work, regardless of volunteers’ subjective takes on legality.

Indeed, as Sanctuary began to speak out about the deleterious effects of U.S. policy in Central America, Reagan officials quickly seized on the opportunity to accuse the Sanctuary movement of having “political” rather than “humanitarian” aims. According this traditional distinction, humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross cannot express any policy critique whatsoever without compromising its mission, while human rights organizations (such as Amnesty International or the Guatemala Accompaniment Project) can engage in somewhat more lobbying and policy critique, if contained within the purview of their mission goals. While the Red Cross maintains that model to this day, other humanitarian workers and organizations began in the 1980s to perceive a serious shortcoming of this view, and to trouble the distinction between political advocacy and neutral humanitarian aid.75 The humanitarian “golden age” came to an end as governments came to rely on NGO neutrality and to exploit it for their own repressive or military aims.

For Sanctuary, dissatisfaction with traditional humanitarian neutrality stemmed largely from the increasing voice within the movement of hosted asylum-seekers themselves. Their first-hand accounts of U.S. and NGO complicity in atrocity formed a direct challenge to the opposition of “politics” to “humanitarian aid” and of “justice” to “charity.” “You are working for charity,” said one group, “only if you deny that a crime

75 In Central America, for example, USAID provided food to Guatemalans interred in “model villages,” thereby subsidizing the rural pacification strategy of the Guatemalan army. See Bortolotti, as well as Jim Corbett, "The Seamy Side of Church-State Charities," (Loaves & Fishes Newsletter: Meeting Ground, 1991).
is being committed” against Central American people by their governments and with the active support of the U.S.\textsuperscript{76} Additionally, refugees’ physical presence, increasing numbers, and personal witness all served to teach Sanctuary workers about the deep insufficiency of their efforts, both in terms of the church’s limited capacity to shelter a massive influx of needy persons but also in terms of the longer-term needs of refugees. Telling their hosts, “We want to go back home. We want El Salvador and Guatemala to be sanctuaries,”\textsuperscript{77} asylum-seekers reiterated that emergency aid was a stop-gap measure while the crisis at hand had direct roots in international policy. If Sanctuary were truly to commit to the long-term needs of the “suffering people,” rather than to its own prerogatives for church-building or civil disobedience as such, it would have to address the roots of the refugee problem. Thus refugee voices pushed Sanctuary to adopt policy critique as a necessary corollary to its emergency response efforts.

But the decentralized character of the Sanctuary movement precluded such radical change across the board. Instead, Sanctuary unfolded in a patchwork of different determinations and approaches, with groups residing closer to the border emphasizing direct, urgent actions and policy critique while groups further to the North generally adopted more moderate, explicitly neutral stances. Widespread disagreement persisted: should Sanctuary conceive of its actions as civil disobedience or as lawful activity?

\textsuperscript{76} Golden and McConnell. p. 131.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. p. 16.
Would taking a political stance facilitate the movements’ goals, as asylum-seekers suggested, or mire Sanctuary in controversy and distract it from urgent rescue work? 

Interestingly, the disputes found partial resolution in Sanctuary’s co-founder, the goatherd and graduate-school-dropout Jim Corbett. Raised on ranches in the Southwest, Corbett was deeply familiar with the terrain refugees traversed on their way from Mexico to the U.S. Corbett’s leadership went far beyond his geographical knowledge, however. Drawing on his formally incomplete training in philosophy, he also became Sanctuary’s principal theorist, putting Locke and Hobbes, Thoreau and Alinsky into dialogue with Buddhist and Quaker traditions, as well as Southwest desert traditions of care for land and livestock.

As a founding philosopher to Sanctuary, Corbett takes a firm stance in favor of urgent refugee-smuggling and sheltering actions, but also argues against defending these actions in terms of “civil disobedience.” Corbett argues that Thoreau’s appeal to conscience fails as a description of Sanctuary’s particular practice because it “is conceived in terms of opposition to unjust laws rather than compliance with supreme laws of the land that mandate the protection of basic rights.” Sanctuary differs from the historical Underground Railroad in that it possesses no analogue to the Fugitive Slave Act. Instead, Sanctuary cites numerous written laws that justify an imperative to protect refugees from unlawful policy.

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78 Ibid. pp. 165, 67, 70


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More importantly, civil disobedience is lacking in its relationship to civility – that is, in its accountability to the public – insofar as it “consigns questions of principle and conscience to private practice, (thereby) abandoning the public realm to the pursuit of partisan (including private) interests.” While a relatively unaccountable disobedience might be justified under certain conditions (those of the Third Reich, for example), Corbett generally upholds a duty on the part of the disobedient to render themselves accountable to others. They cannot rely purely on individual judgment or unassailable claims of conscience. As much as is practically possible, they must perform their work openly and in keeping with basic social obligations.

Corbett grants that Thoreau himself is ambivalent about the relationship between civility and disobedience. Thoreau describes civil disobedience as an “aloofness” from government that is nevertheless consistent with being a good neighbor, but Corbett points out that government is, at the very least, the main “expedient by means of which we come to count on one another” beyond intimate relations. If government serves this capacity even imperfectly or incompletely, then the disobedient also risk (despite Thoreau) becoming “bad neighbors” by failing to justify or reconcile themselves to others. When

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83 Even under the Third Reich, the just actor’s retreat from public accountability follows from the prudential judgment that fulfillment of the law cannot, under these conditions, coexist with openness. It never becomes more than provisional reliance on private judgment. Corbett’s detailed descriptions of Sanctuary demonstrate his and his co-laborers’ own prudential determinations: duly-constituted authorities are notified of each Sanctuary action, but only age, sex, and nationality are provided. No names. Moreover, Sanctuary’s notices are postmarked before the action, but not expected to arrive until after the action is completed.
grounded on the conscience or on non-negotiable appeals to higher law, civil disobedience easily degenerates into “do-gooder vigilantism.” By contrast, Corbett calls on those who confront unjust government to “disobey the government … in a way that supports the rule of law.” This option he terms “civil initiative,” distinguishing it from civil disobedience on the one hand and from uncivil obedience on the other.

Corbett defines Civil Initiative as a balance between the “responsibility (to protect) the persecuted” and “accountability to the legal order.” The responsibility to the persecuted guides its determinations about when and whether to obey government in fulfillment of the law. Protecting the persecuted could, however, be compatible with other modes of action, including civil disobedience and, conceivably, uncivil disobedience (again under the Third Reich). The aspect of public accountability, however, distinguishes Civil Initiative as an exercise in community-building beyond mere emergency rescue services.

Corbett identifies seven criteria that mark Civil Initiative as a publicly accountable exercise that contributes to (or, as he puts it in Goatwalking, “hallows”) civil society. Corbett’s “A Definition of Civil Initiative” describes these so thoroughly and concisely that I prefer to quote him at length:

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84 Corbett, "Sanctuary, Basic Rights, and Humanity's Fault Lines."

85 A helpful label for an oft-overlooked but common form of the political actor’s relationship to government.


87 Under a just regime in which no person is persecuted, civil obedience would suffice. This fictitious, utopian state of affairs Corbett does not address outside of prophetic gesture.

- **Nonviolence** checks vigilantism. Civil initiative neither evades nor seizes police powers.
- **Truthfulness** is the foundation for accountability. Civil initiative must be open and subject to public examination.
- Civil initiative is **catholic** (in the sense of all-embracing) rather than factional, protecting those whose rights are being violated regardless of the victim’s ideological position or political usefulness.
- Civil initiative is **dialogical**, addressing government officials as persons, not just as adversaries or functionaries. Any genuine reconciliation of civil initiative with bureaucratic practice – the discovery of an accommodation that does not compromise human rights – is a joint achievement: civil initiative can never be based on non-negotiable demands.\(^{89}\)
- Action that is **germane** to victims’ needs for protection distinguishes civil initiative from reactions that are primarily symbolic or expressive. As a corollary, media coverage and public opinion are of secondary importance when our central concern is to do justice rather than to petition others to do it.\(^{90}\)
- Civil initiative’s emergency exercise of governmental functions is **volunteer-based**. The community must never forfeit its duty to protect the victims of human rights violations, but no new bureaucracy should be formed that would oppose the return of governmental functions to those constitutionally designated to assume responsibility.
- Civil initiative is **community-centered**. To actualize the Nuremburg mandate, our exercise of civil initiative must be socially sustained and congregationally coherent; it must integrate, outlast, and outreach individual acts of conscience.

Corbett’s Civil Initiative provides a vocabulary and framework for political actors who challenge their government’s abuses but who do not necessarily challenge the law as it is written (they might, though, cite some positive laws against others) or willingly submit to penalties that would hamper their ability to continue fulfilling the mandate to protect

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\(^{89}\) Here, Corbett contrasts civil initiative to Alinsky on “polarization.” Corbett generally disapproves of Alinsky-style organizing, although he concedes that a community formed by civil initiative should at least be familiar with political jiu-jitsu, a matter of preparedness.

\(^{90}\) Crucially, Corbett does not reject symbolic actions and media coverage completely, only ranks them below direct justice on his scale of priorities. Expressive, media action serves just action rather than the other way around.
governments’ victims. The latter consideration is especially important even when positive law is wholly unjust. Civil Initiative applies where good-enough laws are ignored, violated, or unenforced by authorities, resulting in a crisis that demands direct, corrective actions, but more importantly it differs from symbolic acts of disobedience tangential to the particular written laws they challenge and submissive to punishments incurred for infraction of civil code. Given the circumstances of Sanctuary, Corbett prefers to evade arrest in order to continue bringing refugees to safety, in compliance with established domestic and international law and despite the misguided efforts of immigration officials acting unlawfully. He also prefers to disobey in the course of doing justice rather than as a symbolic (and often ambiguous) challenge to authorities. The degree to which he regards Thoreau’s (or would regard King’s) disobedience as tangential to the laws it challenged is unclear, as Corbett focuses his critique on ongoing activist traditions of symbolic civil disobedience (the annual, intentional trespassing at Fort Benning, for example) that appear to him to fall short of "dialogical," "germane," "community-centered," accountable acts. He concedes that inviting arrest on

91 Corbett prefers to identify “the law” with ongoing processes of Lockean/Leveller covenanting rather than transcendent Thomist natural law, but he recognizes that he is in the minority among Sanctuary leaders in this regard (1988).

92 The priority for carrying out the law underlies Corbett’s reading of Gandhi as a near-forerunner of civil initiative – except for Gandhi’s willing submission to punishment and his “indifference to legal defense,” which “would forfeit the very laws civil initiative attempts to preserve.” (1988) Sanctuary, on Corbett’s reading, is open and honest but also has a “catch-me-if-you-can” ethic, a pragmatic sense of its need to carry on its work. Sanctuary risks arrest as a consequence of its commitments (volunteers agreed to go to trial and to represent themselves, if necessary, in order to prevent diverting resources from refugee transport and protection to legal defense for volunteers), but it does not seek punishment as a means to draw attention. It is not a self-sacrificial ethic.

purpose may be the best or only alternative left to certain individuals under deeply unjust regimes, but Corbett insists that such actions do not in themselves further the civil condition. If practiced too readily or too widely, civil disobedience may undermine the germs, traces, or residues of civility that appear alongside injustice.

Civil Initiative’s distinguishing marks ultimately reveal it as more than a tactical response to particular conditions of injustice. Although it develops in response to conditions on the ground, it is crucial to the development and establishment of what Corbett calls “civility,” analogous to Locke’s “political society.” While critics, detractors, or reluctant defenders of civil disobedience like to point to the apparent paradox whereby its practice depends on the very institutional structures it seems to call into radical question (the perennial complaint that protestors should express gratitude for their liberty by not exercising it), Corbett casts Civil Initiative as a condition of possibility for political society:

Far from being dependent upon constitutional government, civil initiative is most clearly practicable and necessary on friend-enemy frontiers, wherever the rule of law is lacking or destroyed, or when governments collapse. When governmental powers are used to destroy the rule of law, civil obedience and civil disobedience both fail to institute, maintain, and extend civil association under the rule of law. Nonviolent civil initiative by covenant communities is then the way human beings preserve and develop societies based on consent, in which the rule of law, as distinguished from the rule of commanders, is necessarily grounded.\(^\text{94}\)

Here we find a response to Weil’s call for an “eruption of new inventions”: when the necessary but insufficient institutions and traditions of liberal democracy and constitutional government have failed. We also find a partial answer to Weil’s concern

about “exhaustion” that would prevent such an eruption from taking place. While
Weilian attention often takes the form of individual non-acting stillness (the receiving
organization notwithstanding), and its relationship to just acts is unclear or ambivalent at
best, Corbett fleshes out Sanctuary and Civil Initiative as tending practices that build and
proceed from sustaining, “covenant community.” In fact, forming the covenant
community is the primary means by which we practice (in Weil’s terms) the “indirect
respect” for the other that should follow from our “direct respect” for the transcendent,
unknowable essence of the human. In Socratic terms, if civil disobedience is a gadfly to
political society, then Civil Initiative is political society’s midwife. Practitioners of Civil
Initiative go to the gaps that cut through and across civil order, from fissures in
Westphalian order to the border regions between nation-states, the zones of lawlessness
and insecurity within them, and especially those produced by them.

So as not to mistake Corbett’s account for facile optimism about humans’
capacity to enter into community with strangers outside of or prior to political society, I
want to emphasize the degree to which his formulation of Civil Initiative is informed by
Hobbes’ account of the pre-civil condition. A product of the Southwest’s ranching
culture, Corbett is less sanguine about human goodness than are some of his fellow
activists. He agrees with Hobbes that, outside of the civil condition, “man is to man as an
errant wolf.” Nevertheless, he reads the history of law’s establishment in the mythic
West (in addition to the genocide of indigenous peoples he remembers and mourns)\(^95\) as a
story not of lone-gun vigilantes but of mutual protection societies covenanting to bring

\(^95\) Ibid. p. 95
the law into being – albeit still as vigilantes in the first instance. Even Nuremburg, the mandate Corbett takes up in defense of human rights, begins in his view as deeply problematic vigilante justice. The law’s most common historical origins in unlawful violence are a paradox that must be acknowledged, taken up, and worked within. Corbett’s account is progressive in the sense that he believes better possibilities develop out of deeply imperfect histories, but only if political actors work to that end. As co-creative work, Civil Initiative emerges from the frontier experience, constituting community at the limits of and fissures within extant, imperfect political community.

For Corbett as for Hobbes, “covenanting” opens the way from the state of war to the state of peace. Unlike Hobbes’ social contract, however, Corbett’s covenanting community is an ongoing project that never concedes full prerogative to Leviathan. Corbett notes that Hobbes, and after him Schmitt, views the citizen’s position vis-à-vis the state as a “mutual” (Hobbes) and “eternal” (Schmitt) “relation between protection and obedience.” Civil Initiative recognizes a similar relationship but renders it more fully reciprocal. While Hobbes and Schmitt describe a permanent and asymmetrical exchange of citizens’ obedience for the state’s protection, Corbett describes a dynamic in which people who obey the law rather than the government set the example for government’s obedience to the law, thereby protecting the civil condition from the threat of official, state-sanctioned, uncivil disobedience. Moreover, covenanting community extends the

96 Ibid. p. 98.

97 A recent activist tract titled “How Nonviolence Protects the State” offers an increasingly common strain of criticism from the Left: that nonviolent tactics and their near-universal approbation within and without social movements hamper progressive or revolutionary change. Corbett might gladly accept the premise of the tract’s title, substituting “civil society” or “the commonwealth” for “the state.”
civil condition beyond its current limitations when certain people among “the people” commit themselves to form relationships with aliens wherever they discern opportunities peacemaking as a practicable alternative to the predatory cycles of Hobbesian “errant wolves.”

Thus Corbett renders Sanctuary a thoroughly political project, despite his strident opposition to what he terms “politicized Sanctuary,” the attempt by some within the Sanctuary coalition (and by the Mexican Left) to deny refuge to those fleeing Left-wing governments and guerrilla forces and to prioritize refugees willing to speak out against U.S. policy. Corbett considers such measures a mirror-image of Reagan’s restriction of asylum only to refugees fleeing Left-wing governments and forces. Refugees taught Sanctuary workers the same lesson that accompaniers learned in Central America: that partiality for the oppressed is distinct from mere partisanship. Corbett draws the further conclusion that “politicized” or partisan Sanctuary is not only distinct from but incompatible with “partial” protection.

Still, the definition of politics is itself political. Corbett recognizes two meanings in the modern tradition of political theory, choosing to concede “politics” to Schmitt’s friend-enemy antithesis and to take up “civility” as the name of the “catholic”

98 But Corbett is also a Lockean (or a Leveller who reads Locke as a “pruned” Leveller) insofar as he identifies community’s genesis in uncoerced consent. As a devotee of Lockean legitimacy who ascribes to a Hobbesian view of human nature he requires a near-miraculous moment to get from Nature to Society (no moreso than Hobbes, perhaps. Corbett also adopts Spinoza’s critique that Hobbes assumes the moral binding of contract – see the 1988 article.) Thus he draws close to that most Lockean politician and political philosopher: Gandhi. For Corbett, Gandhi comes much closer to Civil Initiative than Thoreau, although he is still too willing to accept punishment.

99 Corbett, "Sanctuary, Basic Rights, and Humanity's Fault Lines."

100 An observation I gratefully attribute to J. Peter Euben.
and “dialogical” stranger-befriending politics he practices. Reading Corbett as a Hobbesean/Lockean/Leveller radical reveals the ante-political character of Civil Initiative and of Sanctuary, as well as the central importance of non-violence to their practice.

There is an unaccountable, miraculous moment implicit in social contract stories (and which is variously acknowledged or elided in that tradition), when men lay down arms before they have attained lawful peace in order to constitute peace and political society. Corbett locates Civil Initiative in this moment, that of establishing political society rather than governance. At the heart of the liberal tradition is non-violence that grounds and justifies governance going forward. Traditionally, that moment is confined or bound to a mythico-historical founding, and it recurs only under a thoroughgoing revolution. As a subtle observer of frontier terrains, Corbett knows that such nonviolent, co-creative moments protect the civil order (rather than the other way round) more frequently than statists recognize. Wherever lawful, that is reciprocal, relations have failed, dissolved, or not yet come into being (that is, to a degree always and everywhere), smaller and more limited but also less fictional moments of non-violent gathering, covenaning, and mutual consent provide the means by which we (re)establish civil (and, to reappropriate it from Schmitt, political) society.

Hospitality Patrols

Finally, I turn to the Sanctuary Movement’s modern descendants: No More Deaths (NMD or No Mas Muertes) and The Samaritans (the former has a somewhat more radical institutional culture than the latter, although they collaborate closely). Both
minister to those “economic refugees” who were and still are excluded from asylum law: undocumented migrants. Ministering to the migrants whom U.S. national discourse terms “illegals,” these humanitarian efforts work at what Corbett called “a fault line in humanity that represents more than a division between nations … not a place between two worlds but (a country) defined by the fault line that is its heartland (and which) has no outer boundaries.” Decidedly local, even parochial, in their commitment to this border that has no borders, NMD/Samaritans point the way to a cross-border vocational ethic that emerges from risky negotiations in dangerous terrain rather than convenient travel from one metropolitan center to another.

NMD and Samaritan volunteers patrol the deadliest desert regions along the U.S. – Mexico border. They carry first-aid supplies and leave caches of food and water at key points along migrant routes. The Samaritans typically drive to trailheads along the highway and check on migrants at the Border Patrol’s informal rounding-up areas along the roadside, where contracted Wackenhut security guards take over law enforcement’s duties. Meanwhile, NMD maintains a camp in the remote desert for easier access to the most isolated and (in recent years) most traveled routes. The desert camp also provides a base where lost, sick, or injured migrants can recuperate before deciding what to do next. Together, the groups also participate in political advocacy, medical accompaniment of migrants to the hospital, and – in conjunction with Mexican state government agencies - reception of deportees on the other side of the border. Their practice of border hospitality contains elements of both Accompaniment (going) and Sanctuary (receiving), producing a somewhat hybridized form of those two politico-humanitarian modes.
No More Deaths adopts as its mission “to end death and suffering on the U.S./Mexico border through civil initiative,” and it requires volunteers to pledge themselves to Corbett’s formulation. Its aims also demonstrate the accumulated lessons of politicization (in the non-partisan sense) during the Sanctuary Movement: to “provide humanitarian assistance” appears along with “witnessing,” “consciousness-raising,” “global movement-building,” and “encouraging humane immigration policy.” Taking a page from the lessons of accompaniment projects’ experience, No More Deaths expects its short-term, out-of-state volunteers to use their direct experience of the warlike conditions at the U.S.-Mexico border as an opportunity to teach and draw fellow-citizens’ attention to the complexities of conditions on the ground. Long-term locals want to communicate to the rest of the country the complexity and the increasingly warlike conditions that prevail in the borderlands.

While Accompaniment consists largely in a “non-acting” presence alongside the endangered so that they might act, and Sanctuary involved highly-coordinated urgent efforts in which refugees struggled to find a voice, the day-to-day workings of No More Deaths mix these two modes. This is especially true of the search-and-rescue patrols in the desert, the most dramatic although by no means the only aspect of NMD’s work. Patrollers go out in groups of three to four, with at least one Spanish speaker and one medical practitioner (including fully licensed doctors, EMTs, and others certified in CPR or wilderness first aid) per group. Each group makes itself conspicuous and draws as

101 When I volunteered for No More Deaths, I encountered several other former GAP volunteers who had also come to NMD after volunteering in Guatemala.

much attention to itself as it can, shouting in Spanish “We have food and water, and first aid. Call us if you need help!” They shout “we come from the church” (technically true, but symbolically ironic for some) as a signal of goodwill and trust, since (as Corbett notes), “when Central Americans are desperate they usually go to a church.”

The idea is to avoid surprises and disastrous misunderstandings, to distinguish the patrol from vigilantes or immigration enforcers, and to provide wary migrants with the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they want to expose themselves to these strangers hiking the desert. Most often, an individual patrol will encounter no-one and will simply leave clean water and food along well-traveled trails, to prevent dehydrated people from drinking out of polluted cow ponds. Migrants usually do not ask for help if they are still with their group, led by their coyote or guide. If the patrol finds anyone, it will probably be one or two who were left behind, injured, sick, or lost. Thus, the typical patrol can be characterized as self-exposure and deferment to the judgment of migrants it will likely never meet.

If patrollers do encounter one or more migrating persons in need of help, they will provide first aid and some counsel: how much walking distance remains before the highway, what will happen if one chooses to return to Mexico, and what legal rights a particular migrant might have (depending on age, health, country of origins, asylum claims, and other factors). The summer I volunteered with No More Deaths was unusual: almost every day one or more patrols encountered a large group attended by their coyote. The coyotes did not object to their charges receiving water or first aid, but some bristled when we pulled out maps and GPS devices to show people how much more walking they

103 Corbett, "Sanctuary, Basic Rights, and Humanity's Fault Lines."
had left ahead of them. Information can change the power dynamic between the professional trafficker and his human cargo. NMD patrols may invite the sick or injured to stay at the base camp and recuperate, but it is understood that from there they will have to choose between surrendering to the authorities and making the rest of their way without a guide – neither an attractive prospect.

Naturally, No More Deaths has a difficult relationship with local law enforcement, but there is an uneasy *modus vivendi* between the volunteer patrollers and the Border Patrol. Following the Sanctuary traditions of honesty and community-mindedness, both Samaritans and NMD operate openly, although neither turns in migrants against their will, as this would compromise their ability to provide emergency care – a “partial” implementation of Red Cross-style neutrality and an inheritance of Corbett’s discerning “catch-me-if-you-can” ethic of direct action. Border Patrol pickup trucks frequently pass and sometimes enter but do not search the NMD camp (though this is not a matter of policy and there are no guarantees). NMD will call BORSTAR, the Border Patrol’s first response unit, in cases of extreme medical emergency, and it will help lost migrants turn themselves in if they so choose. There is ongoing but civil disagreement concerning the legality of medical evacuations: NMD contends that it is legal to drive an injured, ill, or severely dehydrated undocumented person to the hospital. Prosecutors and police, on the other hand, have taken an inconsistent stand on the issue.\(^{104}\) After two arrests and dropped charges in each case, the matter remains

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\(^{104}\) There is also the tricky question whether or not driving an undocumented person *back* to Mexico counts as aiding illegal immigration, as well as how law enforcement could or would determine your intended itinerary. During my short time as a volunteer, we confronted this issue with a carpenter who had been deported, come back into the states for his tools, and was trying to get back into Mexico without having to
undecided by the courts, while NMD has severely restricted their use of medical transportation to only the direst of cases. The Samaritans, who patrol less remote areas and come into more regular contact with law enforcement personnel and their private contractors, have abandoned the practice altogether as “illegal.”

Because border hospitality patrols, like Sanctuary before them, are organized as a patchwork of disciplined communities coming to different judgments, there is room for collaboration across difference.

On the Mexican side of the border, the relationship to government authority is somewhat different. NMD maintains a deportee aid station (named “Mariposa” after the infamous migrations of the Monarch butterfly) in “bi-national partnership” with Sonora’s State Commission for the Care of Migrants. Against a backdrop of U.S.-owned maquiladoras, privatized deportation enforcers (Wackenhut security guards), and coyotes gathering mere yards away to take the newly deported back out for a second or third attempt, the aid station provides food, water, first aid, and directions to temporary shelter go through the unpleasant and at times dangerous process of deportation. It is increasingly common for the U.S. to deport migrants far from the place where they crossed or were caught, in order to deprive them of whatever networks of support they had on the Mexican side. A deportee alone in unfamiliar Juarez often makes an easy target for criminals.

Other volunteers have been cited for “littering” by leaving water jugs on BLM land, as well as for “picking up litter without a permit” during NMD’s regular cleanups of migrant trails. No More Deaths, "Press Release: Nmd Volunteer to Be Sentenced for "Littering"“ (accessed 9/7/2010 2010).

within the City of Nogales, Sonora. Volunteers at Mariposa post notice about persons they have found in the desert, so that separated families can try to locate one another.\textsuperscript{106}

In the middle of countless administrations of first aid, NMD frequently invokes the cliché of the “band-aid,” anticipating that common (and often cynical) criticism. In fact, admitting that the work amounts to little more than a band-aid is almost a mantra for volunteers, who also have a set of stock responses: that “sometimes you need a band-aid” and that “one band-aid is better than none” in an emergency. At the same time, implementing the lessons of Accompaniment and Sanctuary experiences, the long-term or “base” volunteers for NMD and Samaritans put considerable effort into policy lobbying and media work. The urgency of humanitarian patrols and first-aid administration never eclipses the end goal of political reforms necessary to limit deaths in the desert. Instead, NMD harnesses emergency to foment political change and, in the spirit of Civil Initiative, emergent political community.

Throughout the Tucson area, NMD’s sympathizers put out lawn signs reading “humanitarian aid is never a crime.” The slogan is aimed at overzealous sheriffs and prosecutors, but the real political message of NMD is the story it tells at every opportunity about the forces that drive human beings to risk death in the desert. NMD defends its prerogative to provide first-aid and emergency care in order to continue doing so. The real battle, however, is not in the courtroom but in the court of public opinion regarding U.S. immigration and foreign policy. NMD seeks “to redefine what people see as ‘the problem’ here in the borderlands. The problem is a structural one, not simply one

\textsuperscript{106} "Mariposa Aid Station Site Orientation and Volunteer Information," (Tucson, AZ: No More Deaths).
of specific policies.” In its press talking points, volunteer reading packets, and training sessions, NMD links northward migrations to unequal trade agreements, narrates the history of U.S. political and economic interventions/interferences in Latin America, and connects low U.S. prices and costs to artificially cheap Mexican labor. Above all, NMD emphasizes that tighter border controls have raised the death toll without any corresponding increase in apprehensions of migrants entering the country illegally. Rather, as closed border policies and ostensibly “free-trade” agreements (always on terms favorable to the U.S.) exert contradictory pressures, the increasing numbers of migrants are pushed into the remotest routes. As a result, border crossing are more deadly, harder for the Border Patrol to monitor, and increasingly managed by human traffickers and drug smuggling networks.107

Contrast this domestic agenda with NMD’s demeanor at the Mariposa aid station, which more closely resembles that of GAP in Guatemala. Before going to Mariposa, volunteers are told they should

Feel free to offer advice, suggestions, and reflections, for we are a constantly developing operation, but please do not criticize anyone on-site…Go through the Mariposa coordinating committee of No More Deaths. We will listen to your concerns. Be respectful of Mexican oficiales. They are in charge, and we are in their country…You are representing No More Deaths and the many years of humanitarian work among groups in Southern AZ…please do not get involved in Mexican politics.108

Thus, while the desert camp is a continuous exercise in collective decision-making (within the framework of volunteers’ prior commitment to the standards of Civil

107 "Volunteer Survival Packet."

108 "Mariposa Aid Station Site Orientation and Volunteer Information."
Initiative and to the consensus decision-making process), U.S. volunteers at Mariposa defer to the judgment of the long-term Mexican volunteers and staffers. NMD volunteers chop vegetables, serve food, treat blisters, and take depositions, but they do not take up positions of leadership.

Like Accompaniment projects in Guatemala, NMD must make prudential decisions about when to be “political” and when “not to get involved in politics,” as well as what “politics” means in each case: i.e., partisan polarization, truth-telling, or covenancing community. Ultimately, differing strategies on different sides of the border all serve a political goal, but dealing with the reality of national borders and inequalities among nation-states and their citizens on the world stage requires some concessions from cosmopolitans and utopians to the contours of the political world we inhabit. Abstinence from politics may itself be a political act if it addresses inequality by quieting one’s own privileged position and casting the silence in these terms. For this reason the Samaritans’ training session begins with a long silence, a ritual invocation of the attentive stillness and silence that must precede tending to subject others.

Perhaps more than either Accompaniment or Sanctuary, volunteering for NMD/Samaritans is a political education in itself. The Guatemala Accompaniment Project is governed by a council chosen from former volunteers and sister-community delegates. Sanctuary was largely governed by churches and their delegates to ecumenical councils. NMD is a smaller, more localized effort and makes its decisions according to a regular, practiced, disciplined process of consensus democracy. Volunteers agree to accept the judgment of the community during their training, and yet volunteers
confronting an emergency (finding an unconscious person or interacting with the Border Patrol) must interpret the consensus in real-time under adverse conditions. Thus “executive prerogative” remains operative even for a consensus-governed project. I can report from personal experience that even among long-term, local volunteers (maybe especially for them) executive prerogative may test the community’s considered judgments and commitment to the principles of Civil Initiative. At the same time, NMD remembers better than many governments that executive prerogative assumes the executive must provide an account to the legislative of his or her decisions and actions. Nightly campfire reflections in the NMD camp therefore provide a political as well as a therapeutic function: they allow “executives” to reconcile themselves to one another as representatives of the legislative community – a consensus democratic version of the “fireside chat.”

As a political entity, NMD is highly dependent on, even a product of, the Church. Like Sanctuary, NMD’s work is mostly supported by churches in the Tucson area (including First Presbyterian, a founding Sanctuary member congregation). Technically, NMD is a ministry, with no incorporated existence of its own. Many if not most of the long-term volunteers come from local churches. Churches collect and distribute resources from food, clothing, and water jugs to meeting space, vehicles, and legal fees. The desert campsite is consecrated by prayer at the beginning of the deadly summer season. On the other hand, many of NMD’s most active volunteers - including short-term volunteers, myself included - are either un-churched or ex-churched, variously (un)familiar with and (un)comfortable with the church’s language. These nevertheless
rely on the Church as the only institution currently willing and able to undertake this work.

I suggested with regard to Sanctuary that Corbett identifies Civil Initiative with the covenanted or founding moment of the social contract tradition. In fact, insofar as he re-imagines the process of covenanted as incomplete and ongoing, he also (and more explicitly) identifies it with church and with the binding power of religio. In his judgment, the church is the only institution “that can incorporate individual acts of civil initiative into a persisting effort.”\(^{109}\) Without its institutional continuity and its traditions of reconciliation and trust-building, Civil Initiative threatens to dissolve into “disconnected acts of charity and resistance.”\(^ {110}\) Corbett did not set out to join the church (he was a non-Christian “attending” Quaker for twenty years before seeking formal membership in a Meeting), but in practicing Sanctuary he soon found himself “practically if not formally integrated into the church.” If Civil Initiative and Sanctuary are to endure as conditions of possibility for consensual, civil society, he sees no body other than church that can shelter them (although, as I will discuss shortly, Corbett has a highly idiosyncratic reading of Church, one that draws him closer to Weil’s threshold than he might recognize when he deploys theological language.)

Still, insofar as it attends to largely unseen, unknown strangers, NMD’s relationship to co-creative covenanting is highly aspirational, deeply aware of its insufficiency. If the American Sanctuary Movement was born out of multiple meetings

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\(^{109}\) Corbett, "Sanctuary, Basic Rights, and Humanity's Fault Lines."

among citizens and refugees from the Borderlands to the basements of churches far inland, No More Deaths is birthed by the body count and the band-aid. Its meetings with the stranger are much more transient and fleeting. Nevertheless, small moments of association and recognition can provide “luminous moments” that – like those Weil found in the *Iliad* – dispel the domain of force and point prophetically to better possibilities beyond our current states of emergency.

I briefly volunteered at the Mariposa aid station in Nogales, Mexico just after I patrolled with NMD on the U.S. side of the border. While I was ladling soup for deportees just off the Wackenhut bus, a man waiting in line pointed at me and said, “I know you!” The week before, I had been part of the patrol that encountered and attended to his migrating group in Arizona. He had been captured and deported shortly afterwards. While the soup line was often a silent affair between exhausted deportees and uncomfortable volunteers in a space plagued by flies, this morning suddenly erupted into conversation as the man who recognized me called me to account, to explain myself and my role to him and to those with whom he shared his meal. His exclamation, “I know you,” was at once friendly and reserved. He seemed happy to see a familiar face but also suspicious of how I, an unlikely face in either setting, had come to be so familiar, how I travelled so easily and quickly between worlds he traversed at considerable difficulty and risk. I had played the role of host in the U.S., and at Mariposa I continued to play this role to a degree, but now I was in this man’s country. Technically, as a U.S. citizen in Mexico, I was his guest.
Although it practices hospitality, I would argue that NMD evidences co-creative covenanting primarily in its focus on becoming a good guest or neighbor. Aside from the churches that sponsor it, the desert camp depends directly on local first responders, sympathetic ranchers, and the childrens’ book illustrator on whose land it sits. Therefore, NMD puts considerable effort into these relationships. A yearly capital campaign provides significant funds to the Arivaca, AZ ambulance team in recognition of the burden they share in treating sick and injured migrants who pass through their community. Regular trail cleanups and conservation efforts take up stewardship of the land in response to the impact of migrant litter (migrants frequently leave clothes, backpacks, and empty water bottles as they lighten their loads) and in an attempt to minimize the impact of the countless water bottles NMD leaves for migrants to find. A local ranching couple (who had been aiding migrants for decades before NMD came along) have long provided free use of their well. Visiting and chatting with the aging ranchers is a regular although informal duty, but not felt as such, and their frequent visits to the camp (often with guns holstered) provide an invaluable education for short-term volunteers in the collaboration across difference that characterizes most worthwhile efforts. For NMD, the “other” may be a co-citizen as easily as an “alien.” The view from the border demythologizes the “shared life” of the citizenry as much as it undermines the dichotomies of nationhood. In any case, Civil Initiative calls us to form relationships across difference, to bring “the people” into being without losing our awareness that every effort to do so remains partial, incomplete, preferential.
Allow me for a moment to return to London in 1943, where Weil admonished the Gaullists for their impatience with the British governments’ slowness to recognize them as a government-in-exile. She held that she and the other expatriots hosted by the British had a duty to their compatriots in France to be good guests and to establish friendly terms with their hosts. For Weil, “the fact that a state of friendship exists or doesn’t exist between two men, or two groups of men, can in certain cases prove decisive for the destiny of the human race.” So the presence or absence of cross-border friendships – even fleeting moments - may represent the difference between life and death, not only for threatened individuals but for the polities they traverse.\footnote{111 \textit{Weil, The Need for Roots.} p. 205.}

**Vocation and Initiative at the Border**

In sum, when considered as devices of Weilian migratory patriotism or partial cosmopolitanism, the several varieties of cross-border human rights activism I have considered here provide several lessons:

First, that bodily engagement, even by proxy, facilitates the extension of the imagination. Accompaniment and related strategies go beyond common education or awareness-raising activities in using the physical relocation of some to enhance the imaginations of others. This “liaison” strategy may represent one of the stronger “devices” in the pluripolitan toolbox. At the same time, physical proximity is only one means among many. It is not always practical or desirable as a mode of attention to the other. Accompaniment, Sanctuary, and Civil Initiative commonly attend to unseen,
anonymous others. Discerning distance and reserve may be as important in some circumstances as intimate knowledge. Even then, however, bodies on the ground will play a major role in guiding discernment and judgment.

Second, that “partiality” in the first sense – as favoritism, closeness, or advocacy – is certainly necessary, but talk of “care for those closest by” must continually be interrogated. The debates between cosmopolitans and internationalists on the one hand and communitarians and patriots on the other often focus on the supposed (ir)relevance of closeness or distance. Accompaniment, Sanctuary, and NMD/Samaritan patrols suggest that proximity is only one dimension of partiality. In these projects, partiality or preferential consideration goes to cross-cutting and contingent alliances. Perhaps Central Americans merit more concern from North Americans than do North Africans, but if so it is not due to physical proximity but historical enmeshment, which involves proximity coincidentally. Keeping Accompaniment and the varieties of border activism in view also troubles “concentric circle” talk and the too-easy notion that one starts in one’s little platoon and simply moves outward from there. After all, if compassion begins with the local, and you live in Nogales, Arizona, maybe (I stress maybe, since I do not fetishize proximity) you should learn love of Nogales, Sonora, Mexico before and on the way to patriotism for the U.S. or to global humanity.

The devices or practices I have discussed evidence partiality’s second sense – incompleteness - in several ways. First, like Weil’s vocation at the threshold, they involve some people sometimes, some people all of the time, and maybe all people some of the time. The work is too challenging and even dangerous to require it at all times of
all moral or political actors. Corbett stresses that Civil Initiative is “voluntary” as well as “errantry,” not a Kantian imperative or a universally compelling standard. He follows Quixote rather than Kant into “an insecure, impolitic, minority way of life,” and he interprets the Knight-errant’s maxim thusly: “To open the way, a cultural breakthrough need not involve masses of people but must be done decisively by someone.”

A vocational, partial cosmopolitan practice may or may not be facilitated by thinking of oneself as a “citizen of the world” who owes “primary allegiance to humanity,” but prescribing universal allegiance to others can only undermine cross-border imaginings and practices.

Moreover, the nomadic activists who volunteer for actually-existing partial cosmopolitan projects depend on the sustained efforts of residential and local communities who play host. Mostly urbanite university-educated youth find themselves dependent on generous ranchers, missionary preachers, or polyglot campesinos who give them food, water, and transportation from the airport to the desert. Here, the jet-set is generously imagined and enabled by the pickup-driver, the horseback-rider, and the walker. Each contributes to the relationship from its own way of living – those who are more settled house the nomadic, and the nomads bring certain resources to the settled.

Finally, therefore, each participant’s practice is revealed as partial in that it requires other entities and other practices to complete it (inasmuch as it can be completed while remembering that “ours is an not a contented action”), both within and beyond the particular project or community. Accompaniment, Sanctuary, and border hospitality

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movements have a strong sense of their inability to address all elements of the crisis at hand. They point to government, international courts, more structured NGOs, Churches, and businesses as potential partners or allies with whom practitioners of Civil Initiative must collaborate, even when significant reservations remain necessary. Politico-humanitarian exercises in Civil Initiative represent the emergency response end of a spectrum of action. In comparison to more established or official entities, their special strength lies in their flexibility, their ability to evolve, disband, or reinvent themselves quickly, as complex and fast-changing circumstances require. On the other hand, they are often dependent if not parasitic on institutions of greater continuity, extent, and stability.

Still, Corbett’s formulation of Civil Initiative suggests that dependence/parasitism flows both ways, into mutual dependence or even symbiosis. The law, civil order, and political society are sustained and protected from official abuses and pushed beyond their current limitations by communities and initiatives that “open the way.” Accompaniment, Sanctuary, and other exercises in Civil Initiative work in the lacunae, penumbras, and gaps in political order.

In Hobbesian terms, practitioners of Civil Initiative recognize that spaces and moments of the States of Nature and of War persist alongside and within political order: international anarchy as well as the anarchy between an attacker and a victim in a dark alley. These spaces or moments are often understood to simply call for or justify deployments of violence – police, military, self-defense –to protect individuals and communities alike from residual states of nature and war. Corbett’s contribution is to
point out that gaps or failures of political order also call for non-violent, co-creative, consociational responses. Where momentary or penumbral states of anarchy threaten individuals, communities, or the rule of law itself (states of emergency), policing or self-defense responses will be – like first-aid – a band-aid. Longer term solutions require extending and shoring up the civil condition so that no person remains a permanent alien. Civil Initiative plays midwife to the law by fomenting civil relations among strangers and by custodially preserving civility when government becomes the errant wolf.

To reiterate: Civil Initiative does not usurp police powers, which belong to the executive. That is not its function. Nor does it attempt to force policy changes by holding government hostage, preferring instead to lobby delegated authorities in the legislative when and where that may still be possible. In short, Civil Initiative does not try to govern but to establish the conditions of possibility for self-governance and consent to the law, although these will likely appear quite different after Civil Initiative has done its critical work. Its relational and non-violent character is therefore neither incidental, nor strategic, nor a question of maintaining moral high ground. To approach, know, and attend to the Other non-violently is to attend to ante-political moments of founding, refounding, constitution, dissolution, and revolution at the thresholds between war, nature, society, and government (which are often, although not always, geographical thresholds as well – borderlands). Where conditions of anarchy obtain, the people take up again their role as founders of political order. Where unlawfulness and “errant wolves” cut through and across political society, some people among the people may

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dedicate themselves to the task of shoring up the law, and call the rest of us to acknowledge the gaps, the holes, the borders in our political communities.

Civil Initiative is, ultimately, a task undertaken at the border, and it therefore brings us back to the threshold where we began. It is also a task of attending to foundations, taking us back to Weil’s conception of threshold: the *seuil* that lies at the base of the structure. Between them, Corbett and Weil articulate diverging negotiations of the threshold, their strategic closeness to and withdrawal from the refuge of established community unfolding along very different trajectories. For Corbett, who has little time to befriend every refugee he sees (or often does not see) in a Mexican prison, nobility serves where saintliness fails.  

As a *political* virtue, love fails because saints who can love everyone they meet are too late-blooming, rare, and scattered to form an established consociation. Saintliness is a far rarer virtue than the “nobility of courage” for which justice is a virtue. Nobility just requires that consociates do justice to those they hate and disdain, not that the love them.

Love also fails because it must know the other. Nobility does justice, unknown, to others it may never meet.

While Weil described Attention as a dynamic between herself and a passerby in the street, Corbett’s disciples in No More Deaths are likely to see more abandoned backpacks

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114 His source is Hobbes, who (Corbett reminds us) thinks that nobility is too rare “to be presumed.”


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and water bottles than passersby. They must practice justice without knowledge of the Other, toward truly invisible strangers.

On the other hand, to the Weilian threshold-dweller, Corbett’s closeness to his congregational base may appear too intimate. Corbett sees no possibility for Sanctuary outside of the church. In his hurry to distance himself from politicized Sanctuary, he comes close to reducing it to a function of church instead. For Weil, this would look suspiciously like “forc(ing) love and intelligence to model their language on (the church’s) own.” However, even Corbett draws close to Weil’s position when he defines “church” in such a way that it includes his dairy goat cooperative, “Los Cabreros Andantes,” a “church in the societal sense” that was among the first communities to practice Sanctuary. Corbett’s church is never sure of its own boundaries, always open to the possibility of future revelations from unknown others about its nature and its mission. According to his understanding of the church, Corbett the Quaker must love the stranger who “has that of God in him” as a matter of faith.

In closing, although Corbett gives us reason to resist Weil’s equation of love to justice, he would agree with her that charity and justice overlap more than certain parsers of virtue might want to admit. The conditions of statelessness and errantry teach us that the two must work together, for

When the two notions are opposed, charity is no more than a whim, often of base origin, and justice is no more than social constraint. Those who do

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116 Ibid. pp. 111, 121, 161. See also Corbett, "Sanctuary, Basic Rights, and Humanity's Fault Lines."

117 Weil, Waiting for God. p. 36.

not realize this have either never been in one of those situations where there is every license for injustice, or else were so entrenched in falsehood as to believe that they had no difficulty in acting justly.\textsuperscript{119}

As vocational practices situated in the borderlands between “requirement” and “call,” Accompaniment, Sanctuary, and Civil Initiative cultivate a powerful sense of their own incompleteness, even as they call attention to the incompleteness of our received political norms and forms. Political actors who take up the call to attend to threshold spaces and moments point the way for the rest of us, calling us in turn to an increase in the goods of civil, political society and peaceful, lawful coexistence. By providing water and guidance to refugees in the desert, Corbett and his disciples thus invite the rest of us to “follow the drinking gourd” to better life together.

\textsuperscript{119} Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?." p. 5.
Conclusion: Xenophilia

If Accompaniment, Sanctuary, and Samaritan projects open the way for migratory patriotism and partial cosmopolitanism, perhaps patriotism and cosmopolitanism have each begun to look so partial and fragmented that we need a new name to describe this politico-humanitarian practice and its affective registers. How might we describe intentional and hopeful but radically open-ended encounters between strangers in the desert, encounters that challenge, redefine, and further the political community from which their participants emerge?

Simone Weil looked to Hektor’s “internal dialogue” at the gates of Troy as a rare “luminous moment” penetrating the “atmosphere of war” to reveal better possibilities – even when these are not realized. She found a similar hope in the battlefield encounter between Diomedes the Greek and Glaukos the Lycian (an ally of Troy). The two men recognize one another, exchange words and armor, spare each others’ lives and go on to rejoin the battle elsewhere. This exceptional battlefield exchange is possible because each man recognizes the other as his xenos (ξένος). The Greek term means enemy, outsider, alien, and stranger, but it also names a reciprocal ritual friendship between members of different communities. Diomedes and Glaukos inherit their cross-polity guest-friendship from their forefathers, in a “tradition of hospitality (that) persists, even through several generations, to dispel the blindness of combat,” although only for a moment, and only toward one another.¹

¹ Weil, Simone Weil: An Anthology. pp. 177-178, 186.
Weil’s hope for a politics of refuge draws on these two imaginaries: Hektor’s \textit{position} at the threshold and the \textit{tradition} of the guest-host \textit{xenos} that gives shape to unexpected peace and mutual recognition in the midst of a battlefield. By adopting a threshold position toward collectivities and in her work with refugees and marginalized persons, Weil appoints herself \textit{xenos} to a less determinate set of \textit{xenoi} - outsiders, aliens, potential enemies/friends. She raises the question: what traditions and practices enable hospitality across frontiers and other reified divisions? How might we dispel the blindness of combat for more than an instant? How can political actors prepare themselves to multiply and lengthen a few, luminous moments within the domain of force?

In the midst of war and conflicts that threaten to descend into war, \textit{xenoi} encounter one another and confront a moment of decision. In the worst case scenario, they remain enemies to one another, as did Hektor and Achilles. They may exchange pleasantries and go on killing, confining peace to personal and familial cross-border ties, as did Diomedes and Glaukon.\footnote{The \textit{xenos} relationship between the Pericles and Archidamus raises other problems: suspicion by the in-group of those who converse with the out-group and the potential for exploitation of a \textit{xenos} relationship for one’s own advantage. Thucydides, \textit{The Peloponnesian War}, trans., Steven Lattimore (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), p. 81 – 84. See also Herman, pp. 143-144., and Lynette Gail Mitchell, \textit{Greeks Bearing Gifts: The Public Use of Private Relationships in the Greek World, 424-323 Be} (Cambridge University Press, 2002). pp. 63-64.}  \footnote{For two different readings of this story, see:}
insufficient to the task, as do heroic efforts of attention by gregarious individuals. To dispel the blindness of combat beyond a moment, to step out of the state of war toward peaceful and reciprocal relations with one another, we need active, pluralizing, enrooting traditions of filiation among many xenoi.

Hektor, the least successful and least traditioned of the ancient xenoi, points the way. The questions raised by his internal dialogue at the threshold of Troy demonstrate the curiosity that Appiah says should lead us to ask, in an emergency encounter, “why?” By turns, Hektor inquires into his position, his role, and the decisions and events that brought him there. He entertains the questions that the patriotism of forgetting enjoins us never to ask: Why is Achilles trying to kill me? Why did the Greeks come here in the first place, and who prevented them from retreating? What might happen if I lay down my arms, and why am I certain I cannot do so?

Hektor’s position is such that, in his judgment, he cannot engage his enemy-xenos Achilles in such questions. He cannot offer to return Helen or apologize for killing Patroclus. There will be no conversation between these two, not in the narrow sense and certainly not in the broad. How can we get from Hektor’s threshold-heroism, ultimately futile for him and for Troy, to practices of attention to and from thresholds that protect, enact, call into being the vulnerable refuge behind the gates? Hektor’s questions serve as a guide for those of us who are better-positioned and who may yet choose to position ourselves better in the future as specifically hospitable xenoi.

For the practitioners of Civil Initiative, community-based commitment to the question yields and establishes the tradition of hospitality. The Sanctuary Movement
began in the question, “where are these refugees coming from, and why is my government sending them home to die?” It was sustained in the formation of networks of communities able to establish asylum as a matter of institutional and liturgical practice. Rededication to the question, raised by asylum-seeking guests, pushed the Movement from a limited humanitarian into a fully political (but never, for Corbett, “politicized”) self-conception. More recent Civil Initiators have taken the name “Samaritans,” committing themselves to the question “who is my neighbor” and to its paired response, “who was neighbor to the man assaulted and left for dead in the desert?” Meanwhile, Accompaniment projects like GAP flesh out the politics of a “receiving organization” that founds an indeterminate people through attention to the gaps that heroic founders would cover over. In doing so, they commit themselves to the historical memory of atrocity, struggle, and the fragile achievement of unstable peace.

Contemporary practices of xenos able to work within and dispel the blindness of combat, to call us out of state of war into states of peace and society, will draw on these and other exemplars. As we call one another to “do what we are bound to do,” we do well to emulate Simone Weil’s call from the Threshold to Refuge.
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Biography:

David Laurence Gonzalez Rice was born David Laurence Rice on July 10, 1980, in Downey, California. He received instruction at home until he enrolled at Rutgers University, where he was admitted to the General Honors Program. At Rutgers, he majored in History and Political Science, graduating with Highest Honors in 2002. In 2004, after an internship with Tillers International and a year of volunteer work in Guatemala, Gonzalez Rice joined the Ph.D. program in Political Science at Duke University. He received his master’s degree in 2008. While at Duke, he twice received the H.B. Earhart Fellowship; received a Dissertation Research Summer Fellowship for the summer of 2009; and taught an advanced topics seminar on “Politics at the Border.” Alongside his academic work, he served as an on-campus organizer for Durham CAN (an IAF affiliate in the City of Durham); assisted ESL classes with migrant populations at Durham Mennonite; returned to Guatemala to accompany genocide witnesses in the summer of 2006; and volunteered as a first aid patroller and Spanish interpreter for No More Deaths in the summer of 2008. From 2008-2010 he was a Lecturer at North Carolina State University, teaching American Political Thought and the Introduction to Political Theory. He currently lives with his wife, Karen C. Gonzalez Rice, in New London, Connecticut.