

A Declaration of  
Duties toward Humankind



# A Declaration of Duties toward Humankind

A Critical Companion to Simone Weil's  
*The Need for Roots*

Edited by

Eric O. Springsted

Ronald K. L. Collins



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*In Memory of*  
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(1938–2016)



# Contents

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| <b>Preface</b>  | <b>xi</b>   |
| <b>Abbreviations for the Works of Simone Weil</b>   | <b>xiii</b> |
| <b>About the Back Cover</b>   | <b>xv</b>   |
| <b>Introduction</b> ERIC O. SPRINGSTED  | <b>3</b>    |
| Weil in London  | 5           |
| Weil and the Free French  | 6           |
| Weil's London Writings  | 12          |
| <i>The Need for Roots</i> Today   | 16          |
| <b>Chapter 1 · Simone Weil on Rights and Obligations</b>  |             |
| MARIO VON DER RUHR  | <b>23</b>   |
| <i>The Need for Roots</i> and the Language of Rights  | 23          |
| Dignity, Rights, and God—The Case of the German<br><i>Grundgesetz</i>                               | 25          |
| The Language of Rights and “Supernatural” Obligations   | 30          |
| Kant and the “Men of 1789”  | 41          |
| Weil, Religion, and the Public Sphere   | 48          |
| <b>Chapter 2 · The Needs of the Soul as a Basis for a New<br/>Civilization?</b> EMMANUEL GABELLIERI | <b>51</b>   |
| Context: The Debate with Jacques Maritain over the<br>“Rights of Man”                               | 53          |
| The Needs of the Soul and Collectivities  | 56          |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| The Polar Structure and the Unity of the Needs of the Soul                   | 59         |
| An Original Model of Political Anthropology                                  | 63         |
| Vital <i>Milieux</i> and Public Life   | 65         |
| The Needs of the Soul and the Absolute Good: Transcendence<br>and Secularity | 69         |
| <b>Chapter 3 · Politics, Joy, and the Needs of the Soul</b>                  |            |
| <b>JULIE DAIGLE</b>  | <b>75</b>  |
| Liberty and Obedience  | 79         |
| The Resistance to Obey   | 81         |
| The Consent to True Necessities  | 84         |
| The Art and Labor of Politics  | 86         |
| The “Reading” of Necessities   | 86         |
| The Establishment of a Social Order  | 91         |
| The Need for Joy   | 94         |
| <b>Chapter 4 · The Need for Roots</b> LISSA MCCULLOUGH                       | <b>99</b>  |
| Vital Needs of the Soul  | 102        |
| On “Roots” Literal and Metaphorical  | 104        |
| Body as World-Root   | 107        |
| The Genius Loci of <i>Pays</i>   | 110        |
| The Bane of Centralization: Nation-State versus Country                      | 112        |
| Money-Value: Fungibility as Uprooting  | 120        |
| The Greek Example?   | 121        |
| Religion: Taproot of Civilization  | 124        |
| Detachment: We Must Uproot Ourselves   | 127        |
| <b>Chapter 5 · The Degradation of Human Justice</b>                          |            |
| <b>LAWRENCE EDWARD SCHMIDT</b>   | <b>133</b> |
| A Deeper Understanding of Hitler   | 134        |
| The Rule and Role of Force   | 137        |
| The Bureaucratic State   | 139        |
| “Progress” and the Modes of Modern Civilization                              | 141        |
| On Money and Machines  | 146        |
| Nihilism and the Modern Science Project                                      | 147        |
| Platonic Anthropology  | 149        |
| The Death of Methodical Thought and the Degradation<br>of Justice            | 152        |



|  |            |
|--|------------|
| The Language of “Rights” and Modern Liberal Discourse            | 154        |
| Politics: A Double-Edged Sword                                   | 155        |
| <b>Chapter 6 · On Method: Education and Inspiration</b>          |            |
| <b>ROBERT CHENAUVIER</b>   | <b>157</b> |
| A Method to Breathe Inspiration into a People                    | 159        |
| A Way of Educating an Entire People                              | 164        |
| A Method in Action in Work                                       | 167        |
| The Unity of Method, Inspiration, and Perception                 | 172        |
| A Method for Reading the Past                                    | 177        |
| Conclusion   | 181        |
| <b>Chapter 7 · What Is Greatness?—On <i>Reading</i> the Past</b> |            |
| <b>RONALD K. L. COLLINS</b>                                      | <b>185</b> |
| Introduction   | 186        |
| “The Most Serious Defect”  | 187        |
| On Greatness: Contexts and Categories                            | 190        |
| Measuring Greatness: From Critical to Transformative             |            |
| Notions  | 192        |
| Greatness Unbound?   | 196        |
| War and Colonialism: The Price of Greatness                      | 200        |
| History Falsified: The Limitations of the Historical Record      | 203        |
| History and the Human Dimension                                  | 207        |
| A Radical Idea: Greater than “Great”                             | 209        |
| Reflections and Intimations: Orientation Towards the             |            |
| Eternal  | 212        |
| <b>Chapter 8 · The Spirit of Truth: Science and Providence</b>   |            |
| <b>ERIC O. SPRINGSTED</b>  | <b>217</b> |
| The Argument   | 218        |
| The Order of the World and the Beauty of the World               | 222        |
| Justice and Necessity  | 226        |
| Necessity  | 228        |
| The Scientific Image of the Universe                             | 230        |
| Is Weil’s Case Relevant?   | 234        |
| The Question of Providence and Miracles                          | 240        |
| Conclusion   | 242        |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>Chapter 9 · Work as the Spiritual Basis of Culture</b>                              |            |
| <b>SIMONE KOTVA</b>  | <b>245</b> |
| The Critique of Working Conditions   | 245        |
| The Philosophy of Action   | 251        |
| A Changed System for the Concentration of Attention                                    | 257        |
| The Function of the Past   | 262        |
| Work as Daily Death  | 267        |
| Work and Obedience   | 271        |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>Appendix I · Study for a Declaration of Obligations towards<br/>the Human Being</b> | <b>275</b> |
| <b>SIMONE WEIL</b>   |            |
| Profession of Faith  | 275        |
| Statement of Obligations   | 280        |
| Practical Application  | 282        |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>Appendix II · The Legal and Moral Foundations of the<br/>Resistance</b>             | <b>285</b> |
| <b>ANDRÉ PHILIP</b>  |            |
| Vichy  | 286        |
| The Spiritual Resistance   | 286        |
| The Sense of Risk  | 288        |
| Universal Values   | 288        |
| The Role of France   | 289        |
| A New Declaration of the Rights of Man   | 290        |
| Democracy  | 291        |
| The Present Situation  | 293        |
| The Function of the Free French  | 293        |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>Contributors</b>  | <b>297</b> |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>Bibliography</b>  | <b>301</b> |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>Index of Subjects</b>   | <b>311</b> |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>Index of Names</b>  | <b>319</b> |

## Preface

In a preface that was intended for, but never published with, *The Need for Roots*, Albert Camus spoke of that work as “a veritable treatise on civilization.” Speaking of Simone Weil’s mind, he added, “[s]he was biased against nothing, except cruelty and baseness, which are the same thing. She despised nothing except contempt itself, and reading her, one feels the one thing of which her surprising intelligence was incapable was frivolity.”<sup>1</sup>

That says something important about *The Need for Roots*, something that is underlined by Weil’s own title for the work: “A Declaration of Duties toward Humankind.” She was writing about how a nation might be civilized; she was addressing herself to a deep spiritual concern of her time, and, as it turns out, ours as well. So, appropriately, Simone Weil’s *The Need for Roots* has long been recognized as one of her most significant and important works. Yet, despite that recognition, and an admiring suspicion of many of her readers that it is one of the most significant and important works of our time for thinking about our communities, there has not been a lot of critical commentary on that work. It has received a great deal of notice, to be sure. But that notice has not been comprehensive with regard to the work as a whole. Much of the secondary literature has been rather piecemeal. Nor have a lot of connections been drawn between it and the numerous essays she wrote in London at the same time. And, finally, the context and her large aims in writing the work have been underplayed, and left in rather general terms, even to the point of treating it as if it were meant to be a blueprint, pretty much unasked for, for how France should reorganize itself after World War II.

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1. Quoted in Desmond Avery, *Beyond Power: Simone Weil and the Notion of Authority*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008) 102, citing Albert Camus, *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, 1993), 1700–1702.

Largely due to the appearance of critical editions of *L'Enracinement* in the *Œuvres complètes* and in a second, competing critical edition, as well as the publication of her other London essays in the *Œuvres complètes*, much of that has changed. The context is clearer and the connections to the rest of her writings are more apparent. As such, we are in a much better position to appreciate the work in itself, and thus with respect to its continuing relevance.

The present volume is a critical commentary on *The Need for Roots*. Its chapters are taken from the outline of the book itself, with an eye on the topics of discussion that it has engendered since its first publication in 1948. We have been fortunate in having been able to put together a team of recognized, international Weil scholars. The group was not able to meet in person, largely due to the pandemic that continued through the time of its preparation. But we were able to discuss together drafts of all the chapters by electronic means, and everybody was able to make her or himself well acquainted with the work of the other authors. We have not aimed at a single viewpoint, even were such a thing possible. Each author speaks for him or herself, and each brings a distinctive point of view. But each chapter is very much enriched by the perspective of all the other contributors. This says something about the richness of Weil's thinking as it spawns so many interpretive possibilities. We thus hope we have served a valuable function of giving readers of *The Need for Roots* a new and deeper appreciation of Weil's work—and of the issues she sought to raise for our time.

We have used Arthur Wills' translation that appeared in 1952. The preparation of this critical commentary went on at the same time as a new translation was being prepared by Roz Schwartz, with a scholarly introduction by Professor Kate Kirkpatrick. Regrettably, this timing has meant that we were not able to consult or use the newer translation. Nonetheless, the reader should without a lot of difficulty be able to determine the locations of citations in the new translation.

## Abbreviations for the Works of Simone Weil

- APP *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, trans. Simon Leys (New York: New York Review Books, 2013).
- ENR *L'Enracinement ou Prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*, ed. Florence de Lussy and Michel Narcy (Paris: Champs Classiques, 2014).
- FLN *First and Last Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).
- FW *Formative Writings 1929–1941*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).
- GTG *Gateway to God*, ed. David Raper (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1974; New York: Crossroad, 1982).
- GG *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952; additional chapter on “Israel” trans. Mario von der Ruhr, 2002).
- I *Simone Weil's The Iliad or the Poem of Force. A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. James P. Holoka, (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).
- IC *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, ed. and trans. Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).
- LPW *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015).

- LPh *Simone Weil: Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Price with an introduction by Peter Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
- LP *Letter to a Priest*, trans. Arthur F. Wills (London: Routledge, 2014; New York: Penguin, 2003).
- NB *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, 2 vols., trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952).
- NR *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Harper & Row, 1971; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952, 1987).
- OC *Oeuvres complètes*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988–). Citations are given in the format: tome.volume.page.
- OL *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973).
- SE *Selected Essays 1934–43*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1962; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).
- SL *Seventy Letters*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1965; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).
- SNL *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).
- SWA *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986).
- SWR *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977).
- SWW *Simone Weil: Writings*, ed. and trans. Eric O. Springsted (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).
- VS *Venice Saved*, trans. Silvia Panizza and Phillip Wilson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).
- WG *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

## About the Back Cover

The photograph on the back cover of this book is a cropped version of a newly discovered photograph of Simone Weil, her brother André, and their colleague Claude Chevalley (a famous French mathematician). Presumably, it was taken during a meeting of the Bourbaki Group in Chançay, France, in September 1937. Simone served as a confrere and aide-de-camp at the event, which was originally scheduled for textbook preparation but which expanded to include innovations in set theory, abstract algebra, and other mathematical expressions. Simone attended at least one other Bourbaki meeting the following year, at Dieulefit.

The heretofore unpublished photograph was recently acquired from Chevalley's papers by an antiquarian bookdealer in Auray and is currently held in a private collection. Its imagery provides a unique perspective into Weil's leisure activities and reveals an intimate, almost wry persona not commonly observed in other photographs of her. Reproduced with kind permission of Lance D. Lovelette.

The front and back covers were designed by Alex Lubertozzi of Top Five Books.

