

SIMONE WEIL

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*Lectures on philosophy*

TRANSLATED BY HUGH PRICE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY PETER WINCH



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## *Introduction*

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Five weeks before her death in August 1943 Simone Weil wrote a letter from London to her parents in New York in which she briefly discussed the attitude of her contemporaries to her work. Replying to a remark in a letter from her mother, she wrote:

Darling M., you think I have something to give. That is badly expressed. But I too have a sort of growing inner certainty that there is a deposit of pure gold in me which ought to be passed on. The trouble is that I am more and more convinced by my experience and observation of my contemporaries that there is no one to receive it.

It's a dense mass. What gets added to it is of a piece with the rest. As the mass grows it becomes more and more dense. I can't parcel it out into little pieces.

It would require an effort to come to terms with it. And making an effort is so tiring!

Some people feel vaguely that there is something there. But they content themselves with uttering a few eulogistic epithets about my intelligence and that completely satisfies their conscience. Then they listen to me or read me with the same fleeting attention they give everything else, taking each little fragment of an idea as it comes along and making a definitive mental decision: 'I agree with this', 'I don't agree with that', 'this is brilliant', 'that is completely mad' (that last antithesis comes from my boss). They conclude: 'It's very interesting',

and then go on to something else. They haven't tired themselves.<sup>1</sup>

That is a characteristically shrewd diagnosis and it is hardly less applicable to the situation now, thirty-four years after her death, than it was then. Her work has many different facets and it is not always easy to see the relation between them. But, while it would be a mistake to think of her as having produced a tight philosophical 'system', her treatments of apparently disparate topics do hang together and frequently cannot be adequately grasped or evaluated without a view of the relation between them. There are obstacles in the way of attaining such a view. Some of these stem from the difficulty of 'placing' her work firmly within any currently living tradition of thinking. (The disintegration of contemporary culture which is partly responsible for this was of course one of the great themes to which Simone Weil addressed herself.) Perhaps this difficulty is greater for English-speaking than for French readers; and it has been exacerbated by the piecemeal way in which her writings have appeared in English translation.

'Professional philosophers' have by no means been in the forefront of those who have taken an interest in her work. Part of the reason for this is that, though the pieces which have already appeared in English translation do often contain discussions of themes which exercise Anglo-Saxon academic philosophers, these occur in contexts, and in a style, which may create the impression that their bearing on the central concerns of such philosophers is at best a glancing one.

Of the writings that have hitherto been available in French, but not in English, there are two which deal directly and extensively with fundamental conceptual and philosophical issues of a sort which are never (or never should be) far away from the centre of a philosopher's attention. These are *Science et perception dans Descartes*<sup>2</sup> and *Leçons de philosophie*, which latter now happily, if belatedly, reaches English readers for the first time in Dr Hugh Price's excellent translation. *Science et perception* is an immature

<sup>1</sup> *Ecrits de Londres* (Gallimard, Paris 1957), p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> In *Sur la Science* (Gallimard, Paris 1966).

piece, written as a dissertation for the *diplôme d'études supérieures* in 1929–30. While it contains points of great interest, the four-year interval which separates it from *Lectures on Philosophy* marks a considerable increase in maturity and a much firmer sense of direction. The *Lectures* do not come directly from Simone Weil's own hand but consist of notes of her lectures at the Roanne *lycée* taken by Madame Anne Reynaud-Guérithault, one of her students in 1933–4. These notes are remarkably full and have obviously been taken and transcribed with great care and sensitivity. While it is inevitable that there should be moments when one wonders whether one is getting quite completely what Simone Weil had to say about a certain topic, such moments are surprisingly rare. I think there is no doubt that we have here a very substantial presentation of what was said in the lectures. Those who are familiar with Simone Weil's own writings will also at once recognise the authentic sound of her own voice. Madame Reynaud's achievement is, by any standards, very remarkable and there must be very few lecturers in philosophy who have come across such an intelligent and faithful rendering of their teaching in notes taken by students – let alone by students of that age. What surprises one here is not just the ability to reproduce the teacher's actual words but the understanding conveyed in the presentation of what is said about very difficult and complex issues.

I have suggested that these lectures can be distinguished from most of Simone Weil's writings in being directly concerned with fundamental 'philosophical' issues. The suggestion has to be taken with caution in so far as it may seem to imply some firm and generally agreed distinction between what is a philosophical issue and what is not. But this is not of course so; and Simone Weil's later writings, particularly, raise in a very acute form the difficulty of making such a distinction; she is inclined to import ideas which have been developed in what can be recognised quite uncontroversially as philosophical discussions into reflections which seem to have a very different character – that of religious meditation for example. This raises puzzling questions about how these writings are to be taken and how they are related to 'philosophy'. Similar questions are liable to be raised by the work of any truly innovative thinker.



It may help English-speaking readers, familiar with the contemporary philosophical scene in this country, to come to grips with *Lectures on Philosophy* if I compare them with the ideas which Ludwig Wittgenstein was developing independently in Cambridge at about the same time. (Hugh Price has reminded me that Wittgenstein dictated his *Blue Book* during the same academic year as that in which these lectures were being given.)

In about 1930 Wittgenstein wrote:

There is not – as I used to believe – a primary language as opposed to our ordinary language, the ‘secondary’ one. But one could speak of a primary language as opposed to ours in so far as the former would not permit any way of expressing a preference for certain phenomena over others; it would have to be, so to speak, absolutely *impartial*.<sup>1</sup>

The context makes it clear that the supposed ‘primary’ language which is in question would be ‘phenomenological’ in character and that its ‘impartiality’ would in part consist in its expressing immediate experience without commitment to any conception of a spatio-temporally ordered world of physical objects.

In *Science et perception dans Descartes* Simone Weil had attempted to take such a phenomenological language as a starting point, and to trace how the conception of such a world can develop from it. The main central section of that work is a meditation, self-consciously in the Cartesian manner, which starts with an attempt to describe an undifferentiated flux of sensations; she tries to show how the distinction between ‘I’ and ‘the world’ which confronts me, but to which I also in some sense belong, arises through an ordering of this phenomenological world, brought about by the methodical application of operations (such as elementary arithmetical and geometrical constructions) to it. Her main divergence from Descartes consists in an insistence that the word ‘I’ does not stand for a substantial subject of consciousness, but is simply the expression of such methodical activity. This approach leads her into several, half-recognised, tangles. Not least of these is the diffi-

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophical Remarks*, trans. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White (Blackwell, Oxford 1975), p. 84.

culty of giving any clear account of the relation between 'I' as expressing pure activity and the role of the human body in activity.

She rejects the idea that the word 'I' stands for an object that acts on other objects; her view could be expressed by saying that it functions as the purely grammatical subject of verbs of activity. The active element in all such verbs is *thought*. Simone Weil's idea (in *Science et perception*) seems to be something like this: My activity is constituted by everything that I completely control: everything, and only that, which is completely expressive of myself. This includes only what is completely transparent to my understanding, since anything in my experience that I do not understand is something that I *undergo* or am simply confronted with – all this belongs to the realm of what she calls '*hasard*' or contingency. The movements of my body, therefore, cannot be exclusively an expression of my activity, since those movements depend on contingent factors which I have to accept for what they are, which are not themselves a product of my activity. The idea is very close to that expressed by the early Wittgenstein:

Even if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favour granted by fate, so to speak: for there is no *logical* connexion between the will and the world, which would guarantee it, and the supposed physical connexion itself is surely not something that we could will.<sup>1</sup>

So the conception of bodily activity is left shrouded in mystery in *Science et perception*, as it is in the *Tractatus*. The difficulty at this stage for both Wittgenstein and Simone Weil is to reconcile the possibility of making assertions, or having thoughts, which are *about* something (which have a relation to 'the world') and the possibility of acting. Both writers lean heavily on the notion of activity (in the form of 'performing operations' in Wittgenstein's case) in their account of thinking, but neither of them introduces the notion of action into the account at an early enough stage. In the *Tractatus* operations are performed on elementary propositions which are regarded as assertible prior to the performance of those operations (they are the 'bases' on which operations are

<sup>1</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.374, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1961).

performed). Yet it is essential to elementary propositions that they have a 'structure'; and the only explicit account of structure, or form, which the *Tractatus* offers relies on the application of logical operations on elementary propositions, which have to be taken, as it were, as 'given' for this purpose. And in *Science et perception* it is implicitly presupposed that a primitive, passively undergone, phenomenology of sensation can be described before the notion of 'activity' is introduced: for activity needs something to work on. Yet in reality the internal logic of both positions demands that activity is involved in the possibility of having thoughts about anything whatever: in the possibility of asserting elementary propositions in the *Tractatus*, and in the possibility of describing one's experience in *Science et perception*. That is to say, the difficulty in offering an intelligible account of the relation between thought and action, which both of them encounter, is not a local one; it is a difficulty for the whole account of thought that is being offered. Both Wittgenstein and Simone Weil came to realise this as their ideas developed; and both, interestingly, expressed this realisation by insisting on the importance of the line from Goethe's *Faust*: 'In the beginning was the deed'.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of their difficulty emerges more clearly if we ask how the 'operations' of which they both speak are to be understood. In the *Tractatus* the operations are performed on 'propositions'. These are not identical with 'propositional signs', for 'a proposition is a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world' (3.12). How is this 'projective relation' to be understood? It looks as though it must be a feature of how the sign is *used*; but this must mean that the user is active in relation to the sign. A sign is a physical existent and so its use must involve an actual physical manipulation. (In effect Wittgenstein is insisting on this when, later, he remarks: 'We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm';<sup>2</sup> and Simone Weil is making a similar point

<sup>1</sup> See Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 24; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford 1969), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford 1953), I, ¶ 108.

in *Lectures on Philosophy* in what she says about the 'manageability' of words and of geometrical figures.) Hence the idea of voluntary physical activity, at least in the form of speaking or writing, must already be involved in that of a 'proposition' and any difficulty concerning the possibility of such activity, of voluntary bodily movement, will infect the account of what a proposition is. If we cannot make sense of what it is to act with our bodies, neither can we make sense of what it is to think that something is the case.

In Simone Weil's *Science et perception* an analogous difficulty emerges in a different form. The conception of a 'world' about which I can have intelligible thoughts requires that I experience things as ordered in definite series. Order is not something empirically given, but is something which I construct in reacting methodically to the situations confronting me. But the very conception of 'situations confronting me' already seems to imply an order (just as the elementary propositions of the *Tractatus* already have a structure). And the conception of 'reacting methodically' seems to imply that my body has a special place in my world: I control its movements directly in a sense in which I do not directly control the movements of anything else. And yet, as I have already remarked, Simone Weil's conception of activity at this stage is not explicable in terms of controlled bodily movement, since this is subject to empirically given conditions not themselves under my control. The trouble comes from the apparently unbridgeable gulf that she seems to be creating between, on the one hand, an experience which is entirely passively undergone, in which everything is on a level, equally a matter of '*hasard*' and, on the other hand, an etherealised conception of activity which is divorced from bodily movement.

In *Lectures on Philosophy* her perspective has dramatically shifted. Instead of trying to start with a phenomenological description of 'immediate present experience' in the first person singular, she adopts what she calls 'the materialist point of view'. She draws attention to familiar situations in which we observe human beings physically reacting to their environments and tries to show how these reactions form the basis of concept formation. The notion of activity is not etherealised, as it had been in *Science et perception*:

it is exhibited, mainly in chapter 2, as a refinement and development of the primitive reactions described in chapter 1.

Chapter 1 also spells out the reasons for this shift in perspective. The question she is considering here is: how is our conception of the world of spatio-temporal objects, with definite, recognisable properties and ways of interacting, related to our sense experience? It may seem natural to approach this question, after the manner of *Science et perception*, by starting with a description of our sense experience 'as it is in itself', without allowing any reference to physical things. Then, it may seem, we can examine how reference to such things can grow out of, be based on, the experience thus described. But our attempted description runs into difficulties straightaway. Suppose I say that I see a red, square patch. To say that it is 'red' is to apply the concept of colour and to locate the colour of *this* patch by reference to other possible colours it might have. Colours belong to a 'series'. If this patch is red, it is not green or blue: that is implied by my description. (One may notice here how recognition of this fact played an important part in the development of Wittgenstein's criticisms of his earlier conception of 'elementary propositions'.)<sup>1</sup> Similar considerations apply to the description of the patch as 'square'. But how can such implications be 'given', 'presented' to me by my present experience of the patch? I am in a position to see the implications, and hence to describe the patch at all, only in so far as I am *already* competent in the use of the terms I apply to it; only in so far as I am versed in the application of terms like 'red', 'blue', 'green', or 'square', 'round', 'triangular', etc., in other situations. But, if this is a general truth, I cannot have directly drawn such an ability, cannot have derived my concepts, from *any* particular experience I have had because, whichever I choose, the same difficulty can be made.

The difficulty is one involving the notion of time; and it is a virtue of Simone Weil's discussion that she emphasises fundamental difficulties in applying temporal notions within the context of such a primitive 'phenomenology'. I can only describe what I experi-

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Blackwell, Oxford 1974), pp. 210–11.

ence *now* by bringing it into some determinate relation with what I have experienced in the past and what I may experience in the future. (This is not a regrettable incapacity, but a feature of what we should be prepared to call a 'description'.) But, we want to ask, what have past and future got to do with the experience I am having *now*? They seem to be quite external to that experience and the whole point of the phenomenological description was supposed to be that it fastened on something which could, considered in itself, provide a basis for our concepts.

As far as the sensation itself is concerned, one cannot think of it except by actually feeling it. A past sensation, or one to come, is then absolutely nothing, and, as a result, since sensations have significance only in relation to the present moment, there is in them no passing of time and they do not give us the idea of time. (p. 46)

It won't help to talk of a 'specious present', or a 'duration' (Bergson), which belongs to sensations considered in themselves. This would still be nothing but an internal property of them and would not serve to relate them to each other in the necessary way.

Can we perhaps overcome the difficulty by introducing the notion of *remembering* that the sensation I am having now is like one I have had in the past? How should this be understood? If we take remembering to be another present experience, which I have contemporaneously with the sensation, then that is all it is – another present experience. And how could *that* provide a connection with other experiences had in the past? Indeed how can I so much as think, from this perspective, of 'experiences had in the past'? I am supposed to be confined to description of my *present* experiences! A natural objection here would be to say that remembering, unlike sensation, as it were overflows the present moment; it has an essential reference to something in the past. This is no doubt true. But when we speak of remembering in this, the normal way, we are not describing a present experience.<sup>1</sup> We are speaking in a way which already incapsulates a relation

<sup>1</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the ramifications of this point, see Norman Malcolm's *Memory and Mind* (Cornell University Press, 1977).

between present and past; but the whole difficulty is to see how this is possible within the context of a 'phenomenology of the present experience'. The language we actually do speak does of course contain this possibility, but it cannot be derived from any feature of a present experience. To remember a past event is already to locate oneself in a spatio-temporal order; and what is at issue is the nature of one's ability to do just this.

There is worse to come. We have been talking blithely about 'present' experience. But what can this mean? We understand the word 'present' in relation to 'past' and 'future'. If we have no way of talking about these we have no way of talking about 'present' either; in fact we have no way of talking.

On the contrary, it is impossible to limit sensations to the present moment; to say that sensations are limited to the present moment would be to locate them once again in time.

(p. 47)

That remark may be compared with the following by Wittgenstein:

If someone says, only the *present* experience has reality, then the word 'present' must be redundant here, as the word 'I' is in other contexts. For it cannot mean *present* as opposed to past and future. . . . Something else must be meant by the word, something that isn't *in* a space, but is itself a space. That is to say, not something bordering on something else (from which it could therefore be limited off). . . . And so, something language cannot legitimately set in relief. And so it ['present'] is a meaningless epithet.<sup>1</sup>

There is more than a superficial similarity between Wittgenstein's and Simone Weil's thinking on this point. Like her, he is trying to come to terms with his earlier conception of our everyday language as somehow 'secondary', as based on a 'primary', 'phenomenological' language. And again, he too is trying to do justice to the idea that, if my thought is to have the kind of link with the world which is involved in its being 'about' something,

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophical Remarks*, p. 85.

then there must be something about my relation to the world at the time I express the thought which constitutes that link.

The stream of life, or the stream of the world, flows on and our propositions are so to speak verified only at instants. Our propositions are only verified by the present. So they must be so constructed that they can be verified by it.<sup>1</sup>

Both are making the point that it is a misconception to suppose that the link between our propositions and what puts us into the position of being able to assert them, is an immediate relation to, as it were, a raw experience. Both try to show that the conception of an experience, in the sense of an appearance to me which is without commitment to the 'real' features of what it is an appearance of, is not a datum, but a highly sophisticated construction, *presupposing* our ordinary ways of thinking about physical objects: not 'primary', but itself 'secondary'.

I have emphasised that these criticisms of empiricist accounts of concept formation to a large extent revolve round the inability of such accounts to give any coherent account of *time*. Time is essential to the idea of a connection between experiences; and it is only by virtue of such a connection that experiences are describable or graspable. On the empiricist view time becomes an unbridgeable gulf between one experience and another. We need an account which, on the contrary, will include time as a form of connection between experiences. Simone Weil's account, like Wittgenstein's, achieves this by making the notion of *action* central. Action is conceived, in the first instance, as a series of bodily movements having a certain determinate temporal order. In its primitive form action is quite unreflective. Human beings, and other animate creatures, naturally react in characteristic ways to objects in their environments. They salivate in the presence of food and eat it; this already effects a rudimentary classification (which doesn't have to be based on any reflection) between 'food' and 'not food'. Our eyes scan objects and connect with other characteristic movements of our bodies, we sniff things (or sometimes hold our noses), we exhibit subtly different reactions to

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81.



things we put into our mouths – corresponding to such classifications of tastes as ‘sour’, ‘sweet’, ‘salty’, etc. – and so on. These reactions are refined and developed as we mature; and some of these refinements and developments are responses to training by other human beings around us. A staircase is something to be climbed, a chair something to be sat in: compare Wittgenstein’s remark: ‘It is part of the grammar of the word “chair” that *this* is what we call “to sit on a chair”.’<sup>1</sup> As Simone Weil expresses it: ‘everything that we see suggests some kind of movement’ (p. 31).

It is natural to think of our reactions to objects as based on a prior recognition of their qualities. Of course there are plenty of situations which can perfectly well be so described; but they are cases in which we *already* exhibit forms of reaction in the context of which it makes sense to say that we recognise the qualities in question. Our recognition of the qualities of things, in its most primitive form, is itself expressed in characteristic reactions; reflective action – action based on a prior recognition – is a subsequent, more sophisticated stage, presupposing the prior formation of appropriate concepts. Simone Weil sums up her position in a striking image:

The very nature of the relationship between ourselves and what is external to us, a relationship which consists in a reaction, a reflex, is our perception of the external world. Perception of nature, pure and simple, is a sort of dance; it is this dance that makes perception possible for us. (p. 52)

I remarked earlier that a major difficulty in her previous approach to these questions in *Science et perception* was as follows. The conception of a world which can be studied implies the notion of order; and order is not something ‘given’ – ‘The world, in a storm, is not going to provide us with 1 grain, then 2, then 3 grains of sand’ (p. 71). Order is *constructed* by methodical activity in relation to the situations confronting one. But, I suggested, the very idea of being confronted with determinate situations to which one might react methodically seems itself to imply a pre-existing order.

<sup>1</sup> *The Blue and Brown Books* (Blackwell, Oxford 1958), p. 24.

The new account of perception in *Lectures on Philosophy* shows how this is possible.

When we are on the point of giving birth to thought, it comes to birth in a world that already is ordered. (p. 32)

This order, which is not a result, but a precondition, of thought is introduced by the unreflective 'dance' of the body.

Roughly speaking chapter 2 tries to exhibit thought as a development and refinement of this primitive dance of the body. Unreflective reactions evolve into *methodical* action. This evolution brings with it the notion of an 'obstacle'. I may not be able to obtain food by simply stretching out my hand; perhaps the fruit is out of my reach up a tree. I turn *away* from the tree and look for a stick with which I can knock the fruit down. It is an important and striking feature of Simone Weil's account of methodical action that it emphasises this 'turning away', the renunciation of immediate satisfaction in favour of doing something else which does not lead directly to what I seek. The image of a sailing boat tacking against the wind is one she often uses to great effect to bring the point out. It is, I think, quite instructive to think of the typical activities which make up our daily lives from this point of view; to notice how much of what we do has this feature of taking us apparently, in the first instance, *away* from what we seek. At all events it is a way of thinking which plays a big part in what Simone Weil writes about a great many topics. In general it is important to the way she develops the idea of a natural order within which things happen according to certain necessities which are quite independent of our desires. The internal connection which she is suggesting holds between the apprehension of natural necessities and the renunciation of immediate satisfactions is the basis of some of her most arresting and provocative ideas on the moral and religious dimensions of science – for example in the essay 'Classical Science and After'.<sup>1</sup>

The account of necessity sketched in *Lectures on Philosophy* is one of the most interesting and important features of the book. Once

<sup>1</sup> In *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, trans. Richard Rees (Oxford University Press, 1968).

again there are striking affinities with Wittgenstein. Like him Simone Weil was preoccupied with the relation between what one might call 'conceptual' and 'natural' necessity, between the 'order' which characterises the relations between our ideas and the 'order' which we ascribe to the relations between things. This, of course, is an issue which must engage the attention of any serious philosopher; the affinity with Wittgenstein comes out in the way Simone Weil sees the key to this relation in the application of language in action.

Her main ideas appear most clearly in her discussion of mathematics. The use of mathematical techniques immeasurably increases our power to deal methodically with obstacles by, in the first place, introducing discriminations which are foreign to our unreflective perceptual reactions. Thus, up to a certain point, I can distinguish 'heavier' from 'lighter' objects simply by lifting them. But beyond the point at which I can no longer lift them they are all the same as far as I am concerned: they are 'too heavy' for me to lift. If however I can count, and apply techniques of weighing, I can distinguish something that weighs one ton from something that weighs two. Other techniques, such as the use of levers and pulleys, which presuppose the application of mathematics, enable me to manipulate and distinguish objects which would otherwise all be on a level: 'too heavy'.

It is a condition of such techniques that the mathematical notions which are applied in them should be subject to an order which is 'necessary' in the sense that they are, as it were, insulated from the accidents that experience may bring. Nothing is allowed to count against the equation  $7+5 = 12$ . The 'necessity' of this equation expresses the conditions under which we are prepared to apply these numbers to groups of objects and what we are willing to call 'addition'. If I count a group of five chairs, a group of seven chairs, put them together and then count thirteen, I do not say that in this case  $7+5 = 13$ . I say that I 'must' have miscounted somewhere, or that somehow another chair 'must' have been introduced without my noticing it. It is of course true *as a matter of fact* that I will usually be able to discover 'what has gone wrong' in such a case. This, along with countless similar facts, is what

makes it worth hanging on to the strict equation  $7+5 = 12$ . But these are facts of experience, not necessities in the sense that ' $7+5 = 12$ ' expresses a necessity. Such equations belong to the form which characterises what I am willing to allow as cases of 'counting', 'adding', etc. And it is the application of these expressions in the context of action, technique, which makes our insistence on the maintenance of certain unbreakable patterns in their use more than an idle game – which gives them the character of 'necessities'.

If we speak of 'necessities' in nature we are using the word in a way which derives from the necessities we insist on in the execution of our own methodical activities and in the interrelation between the concepts which are embedded in those activities. In applying concepts to natural phenomena we always work within an understood margin of error, corresponding to the particular techniques of application we are using. The refinement of such techniques brings with it a change in the margin of error allowed for in the application of our concepts. But it makes no sense to speak of a progressive *elimination* of margins of error, since their existence is internally connected with what we understand by an 'application of concepts'. In bringing out this point Simone Weil sometimes, dangerously and misleadingly, says that the empirical application of concepts always involves an 'infinite error'.<sup>1</sup> It is 'infinite' just because there can be no question of its progressive elimination. Far-reaching confusions are engendered if this is forgotten. But equally far-reaching confusions may be engendered by Simone Weil's suggestion that to apply concepts within a margin of error itself involves an 'error'. What needs to be recognised is that the very notion of an error (of the kind that is in question) *presupposes* the 'margin' allowed for in a technique of application. If we overlook this fundamental point we are liable to adopt the picture of a sort of super-necessity governing the relations between phenomena, analogous in kind to the necessity relating our concepts, but never fully captured in our actual

<sup>1</sup> See *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, p. 34. The seeds of this way of talking are discernible in some of the things she says in *Lectures on Philosophy*.

application of those concepts. And I think Simone Weil does sometimes fall prey to just such a picture<sup>1</sup> – I shall say a little more about this shortly. Sometimes – and this strikes me as less dangerous – she speaks of the application of concepts as ‘hypothetical’. *If* such and such a term applies then certain determinate consequences necessarily follow: to the extent that those consequences are not realised experientially, there are grounds for mistrusting the original application of the term. ‘If the equilibrium of a balance did not agree with the theory of the lever, one would say that there is something wrong with it’ (p. 84).

I have tried to suggest some of the many striking parallels between the direction taken by Simone Weil’s thinking and that of Wittgenstein. But there are also striking divergences. Perhaps one of the most fundamental is a strong systematising tendency in Simone Weil’s thinking of a kind of which Wittgenstein was extremely, and increasingly, suspicious. This is nowhere more true than in her thinking about the notion of necessity. For instance, although her treatment of the relations between mathematics and the empirical sciences starts off in the same general direction as Wittgenstein’s, there is nothing in her work to compare with the detailed examination of particular cases that is such a striking feature of, for example, Wittgenstein’s discussion of the differences between mathematical calculation and physical experiment.<sup>2</sup> She is sometimes too ready to run together many different cases with a striking phrase: her talk about the ‘infinite error’ involved in the physical application of mathematics is a case in point. Again and connectedly, I have noted how, like Wittgenstein, she looks for the roots of the notion of necessity in human activities and techniques; but she is not struck in quite the same way as he is by the great *diversity* of such techniques. This led Wittgenstein to see a parallel diversity in the sense of terms like ‘necessary’. Simone Weil is certainly sometimes sensitive to such considerations: a good example is her discussion of the philosophical difficulties created by failure to recognise the essential limits to the

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *Waiting on God* (Fontana Books, London 1959), p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford 1956).

application of a certain procedure and the closely connected tendency to confuse the application of two different procedures. (See, for instance, her discussion of incommensurability in the section on 'Mathematical invention', p. 113.)

But she also tends, sometimes in this work and much more so in later writings in which Plato's influence becomes more marked, to speak of the whole 'natural order' as subject to a *single* 'necessity'. This way of thinking is inextricably intertwined with her treatment of what is involved in facing affliction. She saw affliction as the inevitable concomitant of the 'necessity' of the natural order to which men are subject. In speaking in this way, she tended, rather like Spinoza, to confuse the senses of 'necessity' which apply to the natural laws established within science, with the fundamentally different sense of 'necessity' connected with ideas like 'fate'.

The seeds of this confusion are already present in the way she speaks, in *Lectures on Philosophy*, of the 'insufficiency' of science for the explanation of nature and of 'reality' as 'an obstacle which infinitely transcends us' (p. 111). As though there were a necessity in the natural world of which science gives us an inkling but can never quite reach out to. Whereas the notion of necessity that is in question when we talk, for instance, of a man as 'being defeated by the world' has little to do with the necessity involved in the workings of some (finite) obstacle. And the expression 'infinite obstacle' itself is really shown to be senseless by Simone Weil's own elucidation of the notion of an obstacle as of something that we can in principle try methodically to overcome. The following remark of Wittgenstein's is pertinent here:

Fate stands in *contrast* with natural law.

A natural law is something we establish and make use of, but this is not true of fate.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that attention to this issue, based on a study of what Simone Weil says about necessity in this book, would shed much light on problems involved in some of her most arresting and

<sup>1</sup> *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1977), p. 117 (my emphasis).