

Simone Weil: Thinking the Balance between Love and Justice

Abstract: This article aims to explore some of the reflections of the French philosopher Simone Weil on justice, particularly in its relation to love. The author distinguishes two kinds of justice: natural and supernatural. On the one hand, through natural justice, two wills that maintain a balance of strength are made to coincide and come to an understanding. But when the strength between two parties is unequal, the will of the strong must be imposed upon the weak. It is, on the other hand, through supernatural justice that, in an unequal relationship of strength, the one who is inhabited by this virtue –which is identified with love and is a divine gift– does not impose his will upon the weak but behaves as if there were equality between them.

Keywords: Compassion, love, natural justice, Simone Weil, supernatural justice

Simone Weil: Rozważania o równowadze między miłością a sprawiedliwością

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie wybranych idei francuskiej filozofki Simone Weil na temat sprawiedliwości, szczególnie w odniesieniu do miłości. Autorka wyróżnia dwa rodzaje sprawiedliwości: naturalną i nadprzyrodzoną. Dzięki sprawiedliwości naturalnej, dwie choć różniące się wole, zachowując równowagę sił, spotykają się i dochodzą do porozumienia, lecz jeśli siła między dwiema stronami jest nierówna, wola silnego musi zostać narzucona słabemu. Poprzez nadprzyrodzoną sprawiedliwość, nawet przy nierównym stosunku sił, ten, kto jest zamieszany przez cnotę –utożsamianą z miłością i będącą boskim darem– nie narzuca swojej woli słabszemu, ale postępuje tak, jak gdyby była między nimi równość.

Słowa kluczowe: Współczucie, miłość, sprawiedliwość naturalna, Simone Weil, sprawiedliwość nadprzyrodzona

Introduction

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was not indifferent to the suffering of others. She not only reflected on the causes of affliction, but was always on the side of the afflicted, with the intention of sharing in their suffering. According to her friend and biographer Simone

Pétrément, Weil did not seek affliction because of a taste for it, but “because of a desire for justice. Since affliction exists in the world, she found it difficult to go without her share of it; and above all she believed that one must share in it so as to understand how one can really remedy it. Furthermore, she thought later on that only through affliction can one come to know the truth of existence, the complete and absolute truth” (Pétrément 1976, 516).

In this regard, it is important to point out that Weil always showed a profound commitment to others, mainly to those who suffered an affliction caused by social injustice. In her youth, her commitment was characteristically social and political, but as her spiritual journey intensified –essentially after her experience of Christ in 1938–,¹ her vocation to be on the side of the excluded, as well as her sense of compassion and justice, became deeper and stronger.

The author, who draws her inspiration especially from the Gospel, thinks of the identity that must exist between justice and love in the face of the pain and suffering caused by injustice. It is an identity that cannot come from the simple forces of human nature, but from divine grace. While in God justice is in absolute balance with love, on the human level there is no such balance when one is in an unequal relationship of strength, specifically, when one is faced with affliction. Selfishness, indifference and a certain “instinct of self-preservation” prevent a natural compassion for those who suffer. Hence, as the author stresses, “it is only the possession of the entire soul by supernatural love that revives the activity of compassion” (Weil 2015, 318). Such compassion, besides consisting in an attention to the afflicted, “it is the only love on this earth which is true and righteous” (Weil 1971, 173).

This article has been divided into three parts. In the first part, the theme of justice will be presented from its natural dimension, which consists in the balance between two wills that have equal relations of strength. In the second part, it will be shown that only by means of a supernatural justice, which is identified with love and comes as a gift from God, it is possible to balance the inequality that exists between two sides. And, in the third part, it will be observed that God is the foundation of the balance between love and justice.

1. Natural justice as proportional equality between two parties

Weil distinguishes a “natural” justice from a “supernatural” justice. Justice from a natural sphere consists in an even balance between two parties that have equal relations of strength. In this kind of justice, it is necessary that two wills, which maintain a balance of strength, come to an understanding, since “justice alone has the power to make two wills coincide” (Weil 1973, 142). But, if one side is strong and the other weak, that is, if in both

¹ See, for example, the author’s “Spiritual Autobiography” (Weil 1973, 61-83).

sides the forces are unequal, it is not necessary to consult justice: the will of the strong must be imposed upon the weak and the latter is bound to obey the former. As the author remarks, “there is no need to unite their wills. There is only one will, that of the strong. The weak obeys. Everything happens just as it does when a man is handling matter. There are not two wills to be made to coincide. The man wills and the matter submits. The weak are like things” (Weil 1973, 142).

Weil recalls a passage from the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written by the Athenian historian Thucydides, which provides a clear example of natural justice. This passage describes the moment when the Athenians, who were at war with Sparta, asked the inhabitants of the island of Melos to become allies with them. As the Melians maintained a neutral position, they refused to collaborate with them and appealed in vain to the justice of the Athenians. The latter, in reprisal, “put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves. Melos itself they took over for themselves, sending out later a colony of 500 men” (Thucydides 1971, 366). The French philosopher quotes a fragment evoking the words that the Athenians addressed to the Melians and emphasizes that the Athenians began “by saying that they will not try to prove that their ultimatum is just” and then, they said:

“Let us treat rather of what is possible... You know it as well as we do; the human spirit is so constituted that what is just is only examined if there is equal necessity on both sides. But if one is strong and the other weak, that which is possible is imposed by the first and accepted by the second’. The men of Melos said that in the case of a battle they would have the gods with them on account of the justice of their cause. The Athenians replied that they saw no reason to suppose so. ‘As touching the gods we have the belief, and as touching men the certainty, that always, by a necessity of nature, each one commands wherever he has the power. We did not establish this law, we are not the first to apply it; we found it already established, we abide by it as something likely to endure forever; and that is why we apply it. We know quite well that you also, like all the others, once you reached the same degree of power, would act in the same way’” (Weil 1973, 141).

The Athenians represent the natural notion of justice, in which there is no equality with love. For them, there is no reason to consult justice, since there is no balance of strength between them and the Melians. The Athenians consider that they have the right to impose their will as far as it is possible to do so, and assume that the Melians, because they are weaker, are obliged to obey. But, if circumstances were different for the Melians, and they suddenly became more powerful than the Athenians, they would behave in the same way as the latter, that is, they would believe that they have the right to impose their will upon the weak, since, as indicated in the previous fragment, “each one commands wherever he has the power” (Weil 1973, 141).

When there is an inequality of strength between two sides, the most reasonable thing is that the will of the strong prevails over the weak. From a natural vision of justice, it seems

pointless attempting to make two wills coincide when there is an unequal balance of strength. However, following Weil, “such lucidity of mind in the conception of injustice is the light that comes immediately below that of charity. It is the clarity that sometimes remains where charity once existed but has become extinguished. Below comes the darkness in which the strong sincerely believe that their cause is more just than that of the weak” (1973, 141-142).

“We have invented the distinction between justice and charity” (Weil 1973, 139), claims the author. And by this distinction, “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 1973, 142-143). While in theory justice has a universal character and all people are equal before the law, in practice, the weak or, more precisely, the afflicted, are subjected to silence and lack any social recognition, as if they were non-existent beings. As Eric O. Springsted notes, “even if we treat an afflicted person according to principles of legal justice, there is a profound sense in which there is no equality. (...), the strong act and the afflicted react without any volition of their own (...); they are merely passive recipients of the decisions of others” (1986, 86).

The loss of personality and of all forms of recognition causes extreme social degradation, which “is felt particularly by beggars, prisoners, prostitutes, all kinds of human beings continually exposed to the mistrust and contempt of society. (...) People are naturally inclined to make the wretched suffer by words or acts” (Vetö 1994, 78).

This occurs because “thought revolts from contemplating affliction, to the same degree that living flesh recoils from death” (Weil 2005, 85). Those who suffer affliction are an object of aversion. As Weil states, “it is the tendency of human nature not to pay any attention to those in misfortune” (1971, 63). “Difficult as it is really to listen to someone in affliction, it is just as difficult for him to know that compassion is listening to him” (1973, 150). This means that those who do not experience affliction manifest an attitude of indifference and rejection towards the afflicted. The afflicted, on the other hand, do not have the faculty to give their attention to others and become accomplices of their own affliction. “This complicity puts a stop to any effort they might make to improve their situation; and sometimes it eliminates in them even the desire to be delivered from affliction, or else incites them, in spite of themselves, to flee from the means of their deliverance” (Vetö 1994, 78).

On this ground, in an unequal balance of strength between those who do not suffer affliction and those who do, there is no room for natural justice. After all, there is no natural equality between the strong and the weak. “Our human nature balances power only and will tend to preserve in unequal amounts the power one has (whether an individual or a government)” (Bell 1998, 63). And even if “the sympathy of the weak for the strong is natural, for the weak in putting himself into the place of the other acquires an imaginary strength. The sympathy of the strong for the weak, being in the opposite direction, is against nature” (Weil 1973, 148).

2. Supernatural justice as a balance of unequal strengths

In a context of disproportion in the relationship with the afflicted, a natural justice or, more precisely, a human justice, cannot be envisaged. Under this perspective, according to Weil, only a “supernatural justice” can be conceived. It is a form of justice that is identified with love. In her essay “The Pythagorean Doctrine” the author writes that Plato² “in the *Symposium*, indicates this identity between perfect justice and love” and adds that: “The Gospels use interchangeably the words justice and love with the same signification when it is a question of the relations between men; the word justice is used there several times in reference to alms. Those whom the Christ thanks for having given Him to eat when He was hungry, are called the just” (Weil 1976, 175-176).

In the same sense, in her “Forms of the Implicit Love of God”, the French philosopher when speaking about the love of one’s neighbor emphasizes that: “Christ made this clear enough with regard to the love of our neighbor. He said that he would one day thank his benefactors (...). It must then be admitted that it is the benefactor himself, as a bearer of Christ, who causes Christ to enter the famished sufferer with the bread he gives him. The other can consent to receive this presence or not” (Weil 1973, 139).

Then, she insists that “Christ does not call his benefactors loving or charitable. He calls them just. The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice” (Weil 1973, 139). The “just” or the “benefactors” of Christ, to whom the author refers, are those who are inhabited by the supernatural virtue of justice. According to Richard H. Bell, for Weil this is a “new virtue” since it is not, in the Aristotelian sense, acquired by practice, but “it is given by God in the form of divine love (...), it is *related* to human practices (...) even though not acquired by them. To have this new virtue (...) one must consent to this love given by God; and this level of consent comes from the most sacred part of our being” (Bell 1998, 57).

Those who are inhabited by the supernatural virtue of justice, the one identified with love, can give their attention and turn a compassionate gaze towards those who suffer exclusion, uprooting and social degradation. In the unequal balance of strength, those who are just do not consider the weak as inferiors or as anonymous beings deprived of human personality, but as equals, as if there were an even balance between them. As Weil observes: “The supernatural virtue of justice consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly, in every respect, including the slightest details of accent and attitude, for a detail may be enough to place the weaker party in the condition of matter, which on this occasion naturally belongs to

² See in this regard the essay “God in Plato” (Weil 1976, 74-88) where the author shows the relationship between Plato and Christianity. For example, she stresses that the fundamental idea of the images used by the Greek philosopher is that “love is the disposition of the soul to which grace is given, which alone is able to receive grace, love and none other than love” (Weil 1976, 88).

him, just as the slightest shock causes water that has remained liquid below freezing point to solidify” (1973, 143).

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25-37), to which Weil recurs on several occasions, illustrates what supernatural justice is. This passage from the Gospel of Saint Luke tells the story of a man who was attacked by robbers who, after stripping him of his possessions and beating him, left him half dead on the road. A priest and then a Levite, when they saw this man, passed by on the other side to avoid him. Unlike these two men, a Samaritan, seeing this injured man, took pity on him, bandaged his wounds and brought him to an inn where he paid for his care. In the view of the French philosopher, those who, like the Samaritan, give their attention to the afflicted are truly just, since they are able to have compassion for the sufferer and look at what Weil calls “a little piece of flesh, naked, inert, and bleeding beside a ditch; he is nameless; no one knows anything about him” (1973, 146).

The Samaritan represents true justice, the one that is identified with love, by recognizing the other as a neighbor and behaving as though there were equality, even when there is an unequal relationship of strength between two parties. In Weil’s terms, the Samaritan directs to the injured man a “creative attention”³ that, in her words: “means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying inert by the roadside. The Samaritan who stops and looks gives his attention all the same to this absent humanity, and the actions which follow prove that it is a question of real attention” (1973, 149).

“The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love” (Weil 2005, 92). This faculty of attention allows the soul to empty “itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (Weil 1973, 115). It is an act of justice, of compassion and, according to Christ’s teachings, of “supernatural love of our neighbor” which, for Weil, consists of an “exchange of compassion and gratitude which happens in a flash between two beings, one possessing and the other deprived of human personality” (1973, 146).

Justice, which is identified with a supernatural love, dissipates the imbalance that naturally exists between two parties that have unequal strength. “The giver gives as to an equal, and the recipient responds with gratitude, not with servitude” (Springsted 1986, 86). It is an act of true love for one’s neighbor which, in the author’s terminology, is one of the “forms of the implicit love of God”, a love that is related to some of the mysteries present in the heart of human nature, that is, to “those flashes of justice, of compassion, of gratitude which rise up sometimes in human relationships in the midst of harshness and metallic coldness”. And which, moreover, “give direct access to the central door which is the Christ. Because of their presence there is no possibility of a profane or natural life being innocent for man here below” (Weil 1976, 196).

³ See the article “Simone Weil: la atención y la acción como reconocimiento de la existencia” (Romano 2021, 471-489).

3. Thinking the just balance through love

Those who exercise the supernatural virtue of justice can bring to the afflicted “in their inert, anonymous condition a personal love” (Weil 1973, 150). However, in line with the French philosopher, “in true love it is not we who love the afflicted in God; it is God in us who loves them” (Weil 1973, 151). That is, only God has:

“the power really to think into being that which does not exist. Only God, present in us, can really think the human quality into the victims of affliction, can really look at them with a look differing from that we give to things, can listen to their voice as we listen to spoken words. Then they become aware that they have a voice, otherwise they would not have occasion to notice it” (Weil 1973, 150).

The just person acts without leaving his own trace, he renounces the fruits of his action and consents to be impelled by God’s love towards his neighbor. In Weil’s expression, there is in him a “non-active action”, since “love is on the side of non-action, of powerlessness”. This form of passive action consists for the author of “loving simply that a thing should *be*, of not wanting to tamper with it” (Weil 1956b, 541) and in “acting not *on behalf of* a certain object, but *as a result of* a certain necessity” (Weil 1956a, 124).

The just person does not stand between the love of God and the afflicted, but consents to be a means by which God looks at and listens to the afflicted. In other words, he becomes, even without knowing it, a means of contact between the love of God and the afflicted. As Weil points out, “we should be a means of contact between our neighbour and God, as the pen is between me and the paper” (1956b, 360).

God’s love harmonizes and balances the scales, primarily in the face of an imbalance of forces that would render natural justice and compassion impossible. God is implicitly present in every exchange of compassion and gratitude, since both, in Weil’s view, “come down from God, and when they are exchanged in a glance, God is present at the point where the eyes of those who give and those who receive meet” (1973, 151). And “wherever the afflicted are loved for themselves alone, it is God who is present” (Weil 1973, 150). This means that “God is present, Christ is present, wherever there is enacted between one man and another an act of supernatural virtue” (Weil 2015, 145).

And although only God can give his attention to the afflicted, those who participate in His love are also capable of attention, compassion and a justice that is identified with love. These are supernatural virtues that arise in the human soul and are proof that one is in a loving relationship with God. That is to say, “when a man’s way of behaving towards things and men, or simply his way of regarding them, reveals supernatural virtues, one knows that his soul is no longer virgin, it has slept with God; perhaps even without knowing it” (Weil 2015, 145-146). This confirms, as mentioned above, that these virtues could not be acquired solely by means of human practice or attained by natural means alone, but that they are a grace, a gift of divine love. A love that is intense, excessive and absolutely unconditioned.

“Love is supernatural when it is unconditioned. An unconditioned love is a madness” (Weil 2015, 127). The supernatural faculty of love that is present in the just person is verified by the unconditional love that he directs towards others. The spirit of justice that guides him is a “madness of love” that turns attention and “compassion into a far more powerful motive for any kind of action” (Weil 1998, 129).

Justice in its supernatural dimension is in this world a sign of divine mercy and love. The perfect balance between love and justice is in God, His infinite love can abolish any division and distance, as well as it can balance, harmonize and conciliate what to human eyes seems opposite and irreconcilable. As Weil declares, “the contraries are myself and the other, contraries so distant that they have their unity only in God” (1976, 175).

Conclusion

On the basis of what has been stated throughout this article, it may be affirmed that, for Weil, justice cannot consist exclusively in making two wills of equal strength coincide, since it would be necessary to put aside this virtue when there is an imbalance of power and strength between two parties. The strong will always try to impose his will upon the weak, as far as it is possible for him to do so. Charity would therefore be excluded from this narrow vision of justice. Responding to this, Weil argues in her essay “Are We Struggling for Justice?” that “one must be blind to oppose justice to charity; to believe that they have a different scope, that one is wider than the other, that there is a charity beyond justice or a justice falling short of charity” (1998, 125).

In a scenario of unequal balance of strength, those who suffer extreme social degradation, besides having lost the sense of their own dignity, are the object of contempt and indifference. Only the just person, who is inspired by divine love, has the capacity to renounce his own selfishness and all feelings of superiority in order to direct a loving, attentive and compassionate gaze towards the afflicted. He recognizes the existence and dignity of those who suffer, he looks at them as they are, as neighbors, as equals. Where there is an unequal balance of strength and inequality, justice can only be of a supernatural order.

It is important not to believe, however, that the supernatural dimension of justice is something abstract or totally detached from daily life. For the author, it is concretized through the obligations one has towards one’s neighbor, essentially, towards those who suffer affliction. For this reason, for Weil, the notion of obligations must come before that of rights,⁴ in the sense that in rights one’s own interests could become a priority, while in obligations there is an attitude of solidarity with others, in particular, justice is related to love, compassion and attention. In “Human Personality” the author writes that “to place the notion of rights

⁴ An important example in which the notion of obligations comes before that of rights can be found in the author’s second “grand œuvre”: *The Need for Roots: prelude towards a declaration of duties towards mankind* (Weil 1971).

at the centre of social conflicts is to inhibit any possible impulse of charity on both sides” (Weil 2005, 83). She also points out that “to possess a right implies the possibility of making good or bad use of it; therefore rights are alien to good. On the other hand, it is always and everywhere good to fulfil an obligation” (Weil 2005, 86).

Justice seen from Weil’s point of view focuses on the obligations one has towards one’s neighbor. In an unequal environment, for her it is fundamental to recognize the existence of the afflicted, to determine their real needs, to direct to them a generous, unreserved, disinterested love, a love that “is a disposition of the supernatural part of the soul” (Weil 1956a, 241). It is then, that the imbalance of power and strength is no longer an obstacle to a harmony between two unequal parties, an exchange of compassion and gratitude, a mutual consent. According to the French philosopher, this is the way in which “supernatural justice, supernatural friendship or love, are found to be implicit in all human relationships where, without there being an equality of force or of need, there is a search for mutual consent. The desire for mutual consent is charity” (Weil 1976, 177).

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