

Upon the CIX anniversary of Simone Weil's birth (1909-1943)

EQUALITY IS ONE OF THE NEEDS OF THE SOUL

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In 1975, Rousseau published his reflections on the causes of the differences separating human beings from one another, written a year earlier upon the occasion of the contest that the Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles Lettres of Dijon had convened in respect to the following questions: a) What was the origin of inequality among men, and b) Does natural law authorize it?

In his presentation, the French philosopher referred primarily to the inequality that we ourselves have created; to his mind, an *artificial inequality* that could only be resolved by focusing on true human needs and the basic principles of duties and obligations. An argument that, two centuries later, Simone Weil masterfully developed briefly before dying while she was employed as a writer by the French government in exile in London, during Second World War.

Rousseau, in effect, identified two types of inequality. One, which he referred to as *natural or physical*, in reference, for example, to differences in age, health or certain aspects of the body and mind; another one, which he called *moral or political*, established through agreement, legitimized by the institution of property and authorized by positive law, thereby constituting a law of modern society.

Inequality, in effect, which separates human beings artificially and is founded on the various *privileges* established to the exclusive benefit of a determined social group; an elite –Rousseau stressed—richer, more highly respected and powerful, to the point of making itself obeyed.

An artificial inequality that accentuates the natural differences among people since, in absence of moral and political inequality, natural differences among persons is close to none: the proof –he concluded—that we ourselves are the creators of the vast majority of our misfortunes and of our suffering.

Three decades later, however –on August 26, 1789, pursuant to the bourgeoisie’s demands for help to the French people against Absolutism-, equality broke into the social setting upon its being declared a natural right by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and, two years later, by the United States of America’s Bill of Rights.

As of the French Revolution –and up until today-, it is quite the case that everything pertaining to equality among human beings remained strictly adhered to the legal sphere.

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Nonetheless, if inequality is a convention, a social agreement legitimated by laws –as Rousseau maintained-, there is room to think, henceforward, that equality reduced to the law is only a part of the *mythological opulence* of the contemporary world; a sign of the mediocrity of our hopes, an outcome of continuously avoiding the duty of obligations and of the confusion between needs and their satisfiers. We do not need coal –Weil would say- but warmth.

This is to say that we have taken as truth what is only a false narrative presenting false proofs; a fanciful narrative, a fable which, finally, combines incompatible, contradictory, statements in order to misconstrue reality.

In this respect, hence, neither thought nor activism, escape what Weil referred to as *the illegitimate use of contradictions*, creating, thereby, what we might refer to as the *paradoxes of equality*.

Myth and contradiction, in effect, propagate the absurd possibility of building equality among human beings while maintaining untouched the causes of artificial inequality, moral or political; that is to say, they infuse an unattainable purpose based upon the irrational coexistence of privileges and equality.

In reality, it is a matter of degrading the human aspiration towards equality by confining it to the arid landscape of grievances, claims or vindications.

This is how, for example, we value indistinguishably -as unequivocal signs of equality- the incorporation of women into paid employment, into an infantry battalion and even, were she to manage gaining access to dynastic succession, conveniently obviating the privilege implicit in any monarchic institution and the oppressive character of the labor system and the army, both sustained, as they are, in the principle of a strict division between those who give orders and those who obey.

In our own times, the emphasis upon vindication requires, besides, that everything concerning equality elicit the intervention of State institutions; thus, the exercise of rights as pertains to salaries, health, education, nourishment, gender or housing, among others, also serves the enforcement of an incoherent identification between state reliance and equality.

If the State legitimizes inequality, authorizing privileges, how might it eliminate it at one and the same time?

Vindication, hence, does not modify the roots of artificial inequality, only altering, instead, the perception thereof. In this way, equality is turned into a renewable hope: something that, quite like the Communist *paradise*, can be reached someday, permanently feeding the myths and contradictions of the modern world.

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Simone Weil, just like Rousseau, also established a difference between two types of inequality: one that is stable and permanent, proper to absolutist regimes, promoting idolatry and submission; and a mobile or variable inequality –as real and harmful as the first one- which incites the desire to rise, cemented above all in money, the main motivation of human conduct in modern times and a measure of nearly all things. Forever shifting, since money can just as well appear as it can disappear.

She noted that the 1789 Revolution, upon granting primacy to equality linked to the law, in reality promoted the substitution of the stable inequality of the *Ancien Régime* for the variable kind of inequality.

Upon approaching the theme of equality as a vital need of the soul, Weil transgressed, on the other hand, the confinement imposed by law and vindication: the need of respect, care and attention that each individual deserves, recognized publicly by social institutions and by custom. This is to say, that the inevitable differences among human beings should never implicate differing degrees of respect and consideration. Hence, she considered it unavoidable, besides, to eliminate the quantitative nature assigned to natural inequalities: where there are only *differences in nature* and not in degree –she wrote- there is no inequality. [1] The only way of manifesting this respect indirectly, nonetheless, is by paying the same level of attention to all the remaining needs of the body and soul; [2] their satisfaction is the only mobile for expressing it, there being no other –she underscored-, not position, rank, race, sex, age, place of birth or any other individual consideration.

Aspiring to equality would be the equivalent of desiring the good; consequently, when the life of a human being finds itself threatened because of some privation of body or soul, his/her desire for truth, justice, legitimacy, order, beauty and for the subordination of conduct to obligations, is, at the same time, being sacrificed.

However, for each individual in general to receive the same degree of respect and consideration, it is necessary to consider that which is common and identical in all of us.

Weil, inspired by authentic religion and true philosophy, held on to the idea of the existence of a reality situated beyond our mental universe, a reality from which all the good that can possibly exist reaches this earthly world. [3]

The good, however, descends down to us only through human intervention: provided we maintain our attention and our love directed towards that other reality. No one is deprived of that power –she pointed out-, since in order to exercise it one's personal consent is all that is required.

Hence, that faculty allowing us to access the good constitutes a nexus that links each human being, without exception, with that other reality; it is, hence, what makes us identical, beyond any physical or natural inequality and thereby deserving, as well, of the same degree of respect and consideration.

Whosoever maintains his attention and love inclined towards that other reality –she maintained- recognizes, finally, that (s)he is under the obligation, as much in public as in private life –and in accordance with his own possibilities- of remedying those privations of the body and of the soul that may be a threat to another person's life.

Obligation hence refers only to the sphere of needs: satisfying them is the only thing that can express, here on earth, equality among human beings. Each need is the object of an obligation, Weil concluded; there is no other kind of obligation relative to human affairs.

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NOTES:

[1] Weil, Simone. *Echar Raíces*. Trotta. Madrid, 2014. [*The Need for Roots*.]

[2] The body needs nourishment, warmth, sleep, hygiene, rest, exercise and pure air; the soul needs complementarity: order and rootedness, equality and hierarchy, obedience and freedom, solitude and social life, personal and collective property, chastisement and honor, security and risk.

See: Mattié, Mailer and Valls, Sylvia María. *Las necesidades terrenales del cuerpo y del alma*. *Inspiración práctica de la vida social*. [The Earthly Needs of the Body and Soul, complete English version soon to be released.] At: <https://institutosimoneweilediciones.wordpress.com/2017/07/20/132/>

[3] Weil, Simone. *Profesión de fe*. *Estudio para una declaración de las obligaciones hacia el ser humano*. Traducción de Sylvia María Valls. Colección Metaxu, Nº 1 [Profession of Faith.] At: <https://wordpress.com/read/blogs/132763348/posts/67>