Beyond the Personal: Weil's Critique of Maritain

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Jacques Maritain and Simone Weil never met, and only once exchanged letters. Maritain never cites Weil; she, on the other hand, cites him explicitly in at least three places, but disparagingly. Despite their limited contact, which may have left Weil slightly vindictive, Maritain nevertheless played a significant role for Weil. However, it was one in which he chiefly inspired her to rise to a new level of thought by her conscious attempt to contradict him.

A Disappointed Encounter

When Simone Weil arrived in New York with her parents from the Marseilles of Vichy France in early July 1942, she had one plan of action fixed in her mind. She aimed to return to the occupied portion of France, indeed to be parachuted into it. Sometime earlier she had conceived a plan to parachute nurses into the front lines, where they would take care of the wounded in the heat of battle. There were very grave risks in such a venture, but they were essential to the plan. For Weil believed that in such a war one way that the Allies could show what they were fighting for was by risking themselves in an effort of brave self-sacrificial compassion.

It is virtually impossible to overestimate the importance of this mission to Weil. Its moral significance had captured her conscience, and she was desperate to do something for the war effort. Living in the comfort of New York, she felt like a deserter; and were she to be isolated from France much longer, she wrote, it would break her heart.[1] She wrote numerous letters to anybody who might listen to her plan and help in its implementation or help her to get somebody in authority to listen. The recipients included Admiral Leahy and probably Roosevelt himself.

[1]Simone Pétrement, *La vie de Simone Weil* (Paris: Fayard, 1973) 627. Biographical facts are taken from this source.

HTR 98:2 (2005) 209–18

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

When she finally reached England, only to be stuck (she thought) writing reports for the Free French and having the plan declared as mad by de Gaulle, she resigned her post with the Free French and fell into a despair that ended only with her death from tuberculosis in August 1943.

It was in an effort to enlist his help in her plan that Weil wrote to Maritain shortly after her arrival in New York, hoping that he might not only be sympathetic but also that he might have some influence among the Free French, for whom he was an intellectual hero. Maritain was out of town but replied on 4 August with a friendly letter. He wrote that Weil's purpose was lofty and noble, and, although he did not know whether her plan was practicable, that he would try to help her meet with appropriate authorities. He also advised her to meet with Alexander Koyré, and to discuss with Father Couturier certain questions about her "spiritual position" that she had mentioned.[2] It was, of course, out of her meetings with Couturier that the well-known and controversial "Letter to a Priest" emerged.

This was the end of the exchange. Yet Maritain obviously remained on Weil's mind. She explicitly mentions him twice in *The Need for Roots,* written while she was in London. First, discussing the soul's need for truth, Weil quotes his claim that all the greatest thinkers of antiquity accepted slavery, despite the very clear testimony of Aristotle, who says that there were people who did not. She comments that since workers reading Maritain would not have the wherewithal to do the research themselves and would have to take his word on the matter, he has offended against the need for truth and ought to be haled in front of a tribunal that could censure him.[3] (Her comment is somewhat less silly than it sounds, since it is made in the service of a larger and very serious point about the responsibility of writers in a society.) Second, at the end of *The Need for Roots*, she directly quotes him as saying that "the notion of right is even deeper than that of moral obligation, for God has a sovereign right over his creatures and he has no moral obligation to them."[4] This thought absolutely appalled her, and she cites it as an example of what she deemed "the Roman conception of God," that is, a God who is like an emperor exercising sovereignty over subjects as slaves. This is a very important point, as I shall argue below. Nevertheless, it also indicates a clear lack of pleasure with Maritain that is further underlined in the essay "Human Personality" ("La personne et le sacré"). If Maritain is indeed its target,[5] then he is also one of those

[2]Although the correspondence has yet to be published, Pétrement saw the letters and described Maritain's reply as friendly (ibid.).

[3]*The Need for Roots* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971) 38. Compare Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* (London: Geofrey Bles, 1944) 57; trans. of *Les droits de l'homme et le loi naturale* (New York: Éditions de la Maison française, 1942). Citations are from the English translation.

[4]*The Need for Roots*, 277–78; compare Maritain, *Rights of Man*, 37.

[5]As Simone Fraisse and I have maintained. See Simone Fraisse, "Simone Weil, la personne et les droits de l'homme," *Cahiers Simone Weil* 7 (1951) 120–32; and Eric O. Springsted, "Rootedness: Culture and Value," in Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Spirit, Nature and Community* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) 178–79.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

originators of Personalism "warmly wrapped in social consideration," one of those "writers for whom it is part of their profession to have or hope to acquire a name and reputation."[6] One senses more than a little rancor here.

Why the antagonism? To the degree that her aggressiveness is personal, it is likely that Weil was disappointed because Maritain never did provide the help he offered. It may well be the case that the warm tone of the kind letter was in the end taken by Weil as condescension, the sort of encouraging politeness which great people use to disguise a dismissal. Disappointed expectation makes us feel that we have been played for fools. This may not have been Maritain's intention at all, but Weil, who was very sensitive to possible slights and had a lot of experience with them as she scouted for support for her project, might very well have thought he did. If this were the sum of the exchange between Weil and Maritain, it could not be reckoned entirely to Weil's credit. However, there is rather more to their dialogue, and it lies at a far deeper philosophical level. Indeed, it concerns the very idea of depth in human life.

Maritain as the Target of "Human Personality"

Weil finally reached London in November 1942 and joined the Free French. She was given the task of examining the projects that the Resistance committees were developing for the reorganization of France after the war. Her identity card states her title as *rédactrice*. She was bitterly disappointed that she had not been sent to France on a dangerous mission, and even more so as she could receive no serious hearing for her nursing project. Yet this was an incredibly productive time for her. Far from simply churning out the easily forgettable reports of a bureaucrat, she wrote, in a period of little more than six months, numerous essays on the spiritual and political renewal of France, including what has come to us as the book *The Need for Roots*, and several essays on politics, religion, and ancient philosophy, many of which are collected in *Écrits de Londres*[7]. Her thought in these works is at its most mature and most integrated. Indeed, she herself suggests, in a July 1943 letter to her parents, that her thought had taken such a turn that it had become more and more compact, more indivisible, as it grew.[8]

One of the most important of the works written at this time was the essay "Human Personality," the first or among the first of the London works. It is a turning in Weil's thought. It both clears the decks of numerous ideas so easily assumed in thinking about the human being and human communities in liberal democracies, clearly distinguishing Weil's own views, and introduces many of the great themes of the London writings, such as her notion of the impersonal, and her argument

[6]"Human Personality," in *Selected Essays 1934–1943* (ed. and trans. Richard Rees; New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 17.

[7]*Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

[8]*Seventy Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) 196.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that obligations absolutely have precedence over rights. It is an extremely original essay and has a timeless quality, as do many of her writings.

Yet, despite its timeless quality it is also a highly contextual essay. Part of that context is, of course, the concern over just what France should look like after the war, of how it would conceive and organize its laws, social concerns, and politics. In short, she was concerned about how justice would be conceived, especially given all the competing voices in those chaotic times. That much has always been recognizable and recognized. Another part of the context has not been so easily recognized—namely, Maritain's little book *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*. For Weil, Maritain was perhaps the chief competing voice in the debate over the future of France. For her colleagues in the Free French, he may well have been the most influential voice, or so Weil feared.

There is no doubt that Weil had read *The Rights of Man*, which was published in French in New York in 1942, and that she could put a copy in front of her. Both of the quotations in *The Need for Roots* cited above are from this book. While "Human Personality" neither explicitly mentions Maritain nor quotes him directly, there are numerous clear indicators that it is a direct response to *The Rights of Man*. The most incontrovertible example is a point that could only have been taken from Maritain's discussion of natural law in that book. There he calls the natural law an "unwritten law (*droit*)" and proceeds to cite Antigone as an example of it.[9] Weil notes in her essay, in a way that leaves no doubt as to what she is referring to, that "it is extraordinary that Antigone's unwritten law should have been confused with the idea of natural right (*droit*)."[10] Weil is making an essential point about the status of rights in ancient Greece, which is part of a more general and extended argument about rights and their linkage to the concepts of person and personality, an essential theme of both her essay and Maritain's book. Thus, it is immediately clear that her essay is a response to *The Rights of Man*. Indeed, Weil is attacking a number of points that Maritain made about rights and the concepts of person and personality in *The Rights of Man*. Simone Fraisse, who was the first one to notice the connection, points out the parallels: "One finds there praise of *la personne* in terms that Weil refused to countenance of it: the sacred, respect, expansiveness, rights."[11] One may also add to this list Weil's discussions of the relation of the person to the collectivity, and her equally subtle but insistent differences from Maritain on the issue of human labor.[12]

[9]*The Rights of Man*, 34, 35.

[10]"Human Personality," 20.

[11]"On y trouve l'éloge de la personne, à laquelle sont associés les termes que Simone Weil refusait de lui reconnaître: le sacré, le respect, l'épanouissement, le droit." Fraisse, "Simone Weil, la personne et les droits de l'homme," 123–24.

[12]This issue of human labor admirably illustrates Weil's approach to Maritain's book. Maritain spends considerable time defending the dignity of labor, seeking to liberate it from the conditions of slavery and servitude (*The Rights of Man*, 50–60). Weil, like Hannah Arendt who followed her on this, would agree in the abstract. But unlike Maritain, who thinks we ought to aim at progressive liberation from material necessity (22, 27) and ought to subjugate nature (26), she thinks that the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If this is a direct response, what sort of response it is needs to be considered, however. While rather thorough in covering a number of Maritain's points, it is not exactly a systematic critique, a point-by-point refutation. Nor is it, despite everything else, one that is entirely unsympathetic to Maritain's project. In fact, Weil and Maritain might well agree on any number of items of concern that they both canvass: the deep problems of both individualism and totalitarianism, and the need to establish the human being as ontologically related to God. For this reason, a point-by-point refutation would miss the mark, since it is a general approach to these problems that she is worried about. Indeed, to read it as a point-by-point refutation would suggest that Weil had let a rather unfair prejudice color her reading of Maritain and that she had in fact utterly misread him. Her attacks on the concepts of person and personality are attacks on concepts of the empirical, social ego, and that is clearly *not* what Maritain thinks he is trying to get his readers to consider; indeed, it is precisely what he is trying to avoid by rooting the concept of person in a relation to God and calling it sacred. I think she understood this, and does not make him a straw man.

Weil's response is subtler and more pressing. Its nature is indicated in the sixth sentence of her essay. In its opening lines she has made a commonsense appeal to the distinction between a sentence such as "You do not interest me," which is genuinely cruel and offensive, and "Your person does not interest me," which, she notes, can be used in an affectionate conversation between friends. While the distinction may be more successful in French than English, it is recoverable. Imagine two friends pursuing a philosophical argument. One of them remarks how amenable a certain position is to him personally, because it fits well with the way he prefers to see things. The other can reply, without causing offense, "Your person does not interest me," meaning that the friend's personal stake in it, his person, is irrelevant to discovering the truth of the argument, which is what they are both really interested in. With this distinction in place, Weil comments: "This proves that something is amiss with the vocabulary of the modern trend of thought known

value of labor is that it allows one to obey necessity and is an "opportunity to reach the impersonal stage of attention" ("Human Personality," 17). When Maritain outlines the rights of the working person (*The Rights of Man*, 61–62), he chiefly considers issues of property, such as a just wage, ownership, insurance, and other benefits. Weil for her part comments: "Usually when addressing [the workers] on their conditions, the selected topic is wages; and for men burdened with a fatigue that makes any effort of attention painful it is a relief to contemplate the unproblematic clarity of figures. In this way, they forget that the subject of the bargain, which they complain they are being forced to sell cheap and for less than the just price, is nothing other than their soul. Suppose the devil were bargaining for the soul of some poor wretch and someone, moved by pity, should step in and say to the devil: It is a shame for you to bid so low; the commodity is worth at least twice as much" ("Human Personality," 18). Here, while she is contesting a general position about labor, it seems to be the case that she recognizes (and would have others recognize it, too) that Maritain just happens to be one of those who believes it, and who has spoken publicly on it.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as Personalism. And in this domain, where there is a grave error of vocabulary it is almost certainly the sign of a grave error of thought."[13] The accusation, I would suggest, is initially not so much that Maritain has gotten hold of the wrong sort of problem or that he has failed to define his terms accurately, but that in using the term *personne* he has failed to get a hold on *le mot juste*.

That is not a trivial point, and certainly not for Weil, whose own concern for calling things by their right names was categorically imperative. The most charitable interpretation of her objection is that no matter how carefully *personne* might be defined—and Maritain certainly went to some efforts to define it carefully—this is simply *recherché*, and any subtle distinctions will be lost, given the normal freight that the word carries. Weil is absolutely correct. What is heard and celebrated when one says that the person is sacred is *not* that "one can find alone his complete fulfillment" in the absolute of God, which is what Maritain thinks he means.[14] What *is* heard is that the confused mass of desires that constitutes our social egos and aspirations, what we normally call the person or our personality, is sacred. When that happens the sacred is created in our image. I think, given Maritain's intellectual influence among the Free French, that Weil was particularly concerned to warn them on this point.

That is the most charitable interpretation, and leaves Maritain's own thought internally intact. However, while Maritain may have been less misled by his use of the term *personne* than his audience might have been, Weil believed that nevertheless he was still misled, and seriously so.[15] He makes exactly the sort of mistake she fears will be made when one uses the term *personne* for what is sacred in a human being. The problem is Maritain's subsequent easy connection of *personne* to the notion of rights, which Weil thinks belongs to the realm of "words of the middle region,"[16] the realm of ordinary institutions, even though Maritain thought

[13]"Human Personality," 9.

[14]*The Rights of Man*, 6.

[15]Maritain himself was concerned to distinguish individuality (*le ego*) from personality. In a lecture given in New York in 1938, he defines individuality as that "in one which excludes from one all that other men are, [and] is the narrowness in being, and the 'grasping for oneself,' which, in a body animated by a spirit, derives from matter." Personality, on the other hand, does not refer to matter. "It refers to the highest and deepest dimensions of being; personality is rooted in the spirit, in so far as the latter stands by itself in existence and super-abounds in it. Metaphysically considered, personality, being in one's substance a signature or a seal enabling one freely to perfect and freely to give this substance, evidences in each of us that expansiveness (*épanouissement*) of being which, in a corporeal-spiritual being, is linked to the spirit, and which constitutes, in the secret depths of our ontological structure, a source of dynamic unity and of inner unification. . . . It is the image of God" (*Scholasticism and Politics* [New York: Macmillan, 1941] 61, 63–64). This is the core of Maritain's "Personalism." It is unknown whether Weil ever read this lecture. It should be noted that "Personalism" is usually less associated with Maritain than with Emmanuel Mounier. For several years Weil's earlier association with Mounier had led scholars to make him and not Maritain the object of Weil's attack. Fraisse's article (see n. 5, above) in good part was meant to clear Mounier.

[16]"Human Personality," 33

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to place it elsewhere. Rights are a matter of commerce and property, she claims, and are defined by the *jus utendi et abutendi*. That, of course, makes them quite fit to deal with issues of personality and the social ego. But when Maritain suggests that the idea of rights has priority over that of obligations because God has rights over creatures but not obligations, she thinks that something has gone very wrong indeed. Not only has the law of property and commerce been applied rather unequivocally to the divine, the whole sense of the proposition runs counter to the more genuine Christian understanding of God. God acts out of his goodness and love to creatures, going out from himself to meet their needs. Moral and spiritual obligations, as she understands them, are not laid on one—and they are not laid on God, either. They are committed goodness, a matter of heart. To talk about rights preceding obligations in the case of God is to utterly misrepresent the nature of God's goodness and love as portrayed in the Gospels. It is to treat rights and obligations, indeed, as a Roman overlord might treat them.

Personality and the Impersonal

The scope of this paper does not allow me to go deeply into the substance of what may now be seen as a legitimate and important philosophical debate. I would like, however, to say something more about Weil's deepest objections to Personalism and her suggestion that the truly sacred in the human being is the impersonal, and about why she was so insistent on liberating the minds of her colleagues from Maritain's claims.

Weil has two important reasons for rejecting Personalism. One is her considered view of what constitutes personality. Rather than seeing it, as Maritain did, as the highest and deepest dimension of our being, that wherein our freedom is most clearly expressed and needs the most respect, Weil maintained, using arguments similar to those of Foucault a generation later, that personality and its value are constituted by what she called "social matter." The person and the value we put on persons is historically contingent and manufactured by the play of social forces.[17] So, more often than not, when we focus on the person and personality, we tend to miss what is of genuine and lasting value in human aspiration. Moreover, since personality is born out of social struggle, there is always an element of contention involved in personality and its expansion. She observantly points out that rights, which are linked to the concept of the person, are always asserted in a tone of contention, and even inhibit movements of genuine charity. In this respect Maritain, although he wanted to think of personality as quite different from something "deriving from

[17]Christopher Hamilton's observation in this issue of *HTR* ("Simone Weil's 'Human Personality': Between the Personal and the Impersonal," *HTR* 98 (2005) 193 n. 13) that Weil would not have accepted the aspects of personality as suitable candidates for the impersonal even if they were not contingent is beside the point, since she is not trying to *build* a conception of the impersonal. She is critiquing Maritain, who rests his case on them. But it is also hard to imagine how they could be anything but contingent if they are born out of struggle. They therefore are on a level below the fixed and absolute level of moral obligation to others that the impersonal is meant to mark out.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

matter," by linking his metaphysical notion of *personne* to rights ultimately put it right back in that realm of material social struggle. The problem is that he made the mistake of too many metaphysicians and theologians; namely, after making an appropriate metaphysical distinction, he then went on to do metaphysics and in the process ended up collapsing the distinction by writing of the sacred in terms bound by the profane.

The question, of course, is whether Weil falls prey to this same mistake. Christopher Hamilton's insightful article suggests that she does, that as one who writes in language she cannot escape doing so.[18] Even if she sees the impersonal as a "nothing" (at least nothing definable), Weil seems to argue for a psychological-like aspiration for the good in all people. She, too, picks out a single empirical feature and abstracts from it. This, however, seems to me to miss the real point of the "impersonal," that is, as a limiting concept to move beyond Maritain's—or anybody else's—domestication of transcendence.

Weil was well aware of the limits of language and of being a language-user. At the end of "Human Personality," she explicitly warns against defining certain words and using them in a fully specifiable sense, as Maritain unfortunately did. These words include "God," "truth," "justice," "love," and "good." But if we cannot make them fit any reality we know, if we are not to *personalize* them, that does not mean that we cannot *use* them. She notes:

> These are the words which refer to an absolute perfection which we cannot conceive. . . . What they express is beyond our conception. . . . To use them legitimately one must avoid referring them to anything humanly conceivable and at the same time one must associate with them ideas and actions which are derived solely and directly from the light which they shed.[19]

So Weil is fully aware of how words are used, and she issues an explicit warning. For her, a good part of the ability to use the concept of the impersonal properly is to refrain from putting such words in the realm of the personal. But there is more than this apophatic warning. What she is driving at bears some similarity to Wittgenstein's view that certain concepts do not operate within a logical space but rather define it. Here "the impersonal" is indeed not the name for anything; it may tell us, though, something about the moral space in which we are operating. Within the context of Weil's critique of Maritain, it at least points out that in our moral obligations to human beings, personality won't do the job. But Weil also argues that it is important that such words be associated with ideas and action derived from the light they shed, so that they are not vacuous. Their reality is manifested in the way that we use and configure other words—in this case, other moral and

[18]Note, however, that whereas Weil's criticism of Maritain is that he degrades the divine to the level of the profane, Hamilton's accusation against Weil seems to be the inverse, in that he suggests that she builds up a transcendent concept out of specific, limited experience (ibid., 198, 203–4).

[19]"Human Personality," 33

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spiritual words.[20] The light of Maritain's Personalism reveals only the contentious realm of rights; Weil thinks "impersonal justice" reveals the love that surpasses all understanding and is particularly exemplified in Christ's cross.[21] Given this view of transcendent words, I do not see why one cannot use words to warn readers about the limitations of certain other words we use, without committing oneself to using them to pick out a feature. More important is that a word like "impersonal" can also be used to demand that one think beyond the personal, and to do so without qualification. It can be used to make us pay attention[22] far beyond the limits of what personal interest might demand. This is where obligation resides for Weil.

If this is the case, then the deep issue that divides Weil and Maritain involves the moral space of the personal and the impersonal. Each of these terms ultimately reveals the sort of concept each really is and what it requires of its user. Herein lies Weil's second reason for rejecting Maritain's Personalism: it does not protect and value humanity to the ultimate degree that he thinks it does, no matter how many rights are defined and how clearly, for rights simply do not penetrate to the deepest issues of justice. Talk of them can even blind us to those issues. Even when one's rights are scrupulously guarded, Weil thought, one's deepest inner cries are not necessarily heard or responded to. Those inarticulate cries lie behind easily defined words, and until one can hear the inarticulate word behind the words, one has not heard the human or what is sacred in her at all. Weil bases this claim on her own observance of court cases where everything was done fairly and in accordance with pure procedural justice, yet those who lacked articulateness nevertheless departed with a profound sense that good had not triumphed, that they had not been heard and had even been humiliated by the flow of fine words. Recommending the impersonal in the human being is recommending that it would be unjust not to pay more attention to her.

Understood in the context of her critique of personality, Weil's assertion that what really is sacred in a human being is the impersonal gains considerable clarity and moral importance. For although the very word "impersonal" perhaps chills us as being unfriendly and abstract, it is precisely our ability to disregard aspects of personality—ours and others'—that makes us just, without qualification. When she recommends impersonalism, Weil is not trying to cut humans out of the world,

[20]This is a point Peter Winch sought to make in his *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). He cites approvingly Weil's dictum that "earthly things are the criterion of spiritual things," which he argues "shows that we are not being offered a 'metaphysics of the spiritual,' but a certain way of thinking about the earthly" (199).

[21]See particularly her "The Love of God and Affliction," in *Simone Weil: Writings* (ed. Eric O. Springsted; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998) 41–71.

[22]Thus, for example, Weil says of beauty: "Beauty can be perceived, though very dimly and mixed with many false substitutes, within the cell where all human thought is at first imprisoned. And upon her rest all the hopes of truth and justice, with tongue cut out. She, too, has no language; she does not speak; she says nothing. But she has a voice to cry out. She cries out and points to truth and justice who are dumb, like a dog who barks to bring people to his master lying unconscious in the snow" ("Human Personality," 29).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816005000933 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nor to specify a feature about them, but to make the fullest room for them. She is doing so by refusing to reduce humans to aspects of the human wish for good that are essentially bound up with contingent historical circumstances. Impersonalism maintains not only that the human "expectation for good" is more than what counts as personality, but also that *we* are obliged to respect humans even when they show no signs of being persons (no matter what Peter Singer thinks). As she points out in another essay, in the Gospel parable the man set upon by thieves and abandoned by the side of the road had become nothing more than a stone; it is no wonder that the priest and the Levite walked by him. Yet the Samaritan somehow didn't let that limit him, nor did he let his Samaritanness or the man's Jewishness limit him, either. The concept of the impersonal is meant to stand behind a stronger moral claim than can be generated from the notions of personality and rights. It is meant to call to mind an unlimited obligation that one human has to another. It is not an alternative; it stands on a different plane.

Thus the impersonal is, for Weil, morally prior to any individual aspects of the human. That runs against the grain of liberal conceptions of the human being, including Maritain's. But in the end the impersonal may alone be that which sustains our infinite love and concern and allows us to transcend our own personal aspirations in order to care for another. Stanley Cavell makes a similar point. Discussing Wittgenstein's dismissal of private languages, he notes that people often object to that dismissal, thinking that if the privacy of, say, the way they want to talk about pain sensations is taken away, something important about their inner life is also taken away. Cavell says:

> In a way this is true. I think one moral of the *Investigations* as a whole can be drawn as follows: The fact, and the state, of your (inner) life cannot take its importance from anything special in it. However far you have gone with it, you will find that what is common is there before you are. The state of your life may be, and may be all that is, worth your infinite interest. But then that can only exist along with a complete disinterest toward it. The soul is impersonal.[23]

The point is that if we are to be wholly and infinitely committed to making space for human souls in the world, the commitment cannot depend on their interesting—or our interested—features. The commitment must be deeper and more extensive than that would allow. That is Weil's point. It is not Maritain's. But she may not have been able to articulate it were it not for her encounter with Maritain.

[23]Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 361.

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