Booknotes

In his *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality* (Penguin Books, 2006), David Wiggins takes the subject into areas largely neglected by the predominant trends in Anglo-American moral theory. Wiggins criticises current moral philosophy for the neglect of much that is present in our everyday moral practice, including its basic orientation towards other people, considered as subjects, towards what might be referred to as the second person. Wiggins' book develops an account of ethics based on the notions of reciprocity and solidarity, rather than on the now standard starting points of utilitarianism or of social contractarianism or of Kantian individual rational autonomy.

In discussion subsequent to the book, Wiggins has appealed to the old legal notion of agreement *in solido*, an agreement in which each is responsible for any and all, and all and any responsible for each. Such a perspective Wiggins sees as constitutive of human life. It is prior to any other agreements or contracts in which we might come to engage. It allows each individual to draw on the whole moral capital of humanity and at the same time to be liable for the discharge of the whole or of any part. This is clearly not a social contract view, nor does it take the isolated first person rational subject to be the correct starting point for ethics. As humans we are already, from the beginning involved with others. It is a view of this sort which is developed in *Ethics*.

The core of *Ethics* is its Chapter Nine. There the question is raised in terms deriving from Hobbes and Leibniz as to whether man is 'designed for society', and also as to whether, in Aristotle's terminology we are 'fitted by nature' (Aristotle) to receive training and habituation in the social virtues. We might, of course, want to consider further the nature of the training and habituation we would need to build on this fitting by nature; for Aristotle, judicious as ever, does not say that the moral and social virtues will arise spontaneously. Nevertheless, the implication of the Aristotelian view is that we do have a prior propensity in that direction, and, against Hobbes, this is certainly Wiggins' view.

The key which unlocks the question raised in Chapter Nine may be found in the quotation from Simone Weil which Wiggins gives on his page 243. It is taken from her extraordinary essay on 'The Iliad, Poem of Might' (in her *Intimations of Christianity Among the*

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Ancient Greeks, Routledge 1957): 'Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power not exercised by him alone, that is the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a bill-board. Alone in our rooms we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor. But this indefinable influence that the presence of another human being has on us is not exercised by men (in war) whom a moment of impatience can deprive of life, who can die before even a thought has a chance to pass sentence on them. In their presence, people move about as if they were not there; and (Weil here adds an important corollary which Wiggins does not quote) they in their turn, finding themselves in danger of being in an instant reduced to nothingness, imitate nothingness.'

We may be struck by the similarity between what Weil says here and the Sartrean notion of *le regard*, while also noting the quite different use that is made here by both Weil and Wiggins of the primitive and pre-rational sense of being in the presence of another and of being indefinably influenced by this. In the rest of this note, we will develop the contrasts and the overlaps between Wiggins and Weil.

It is important to realise that the passage Wiggins quotes from Simone Weil is at the start of her essay, and that in it there is much more to come. For Weil there is a more difficult, less even background to this perspective, and more is needed to sustain and enrich this primitive sense of the second person. (The sense of the other person is primitive in that it is epistemologically basic, and also in the sense that, as Wiggins emphasises, there is no form of human rationality which can properly stand over this sense and judge its deliverances as being in some sense irrational or as standing in need of justification against principles which do not take that sense into account.)

Prior to referring to Simone Weil and to a cognate quotation from Philippa Foot about there being a moral space sacred to each individual, which one is not allowed to invade, Wiggins himself wrote of the type of experience on which morality is based: 'That on the basis of which we judge our own or others' acts or decide our own policies is not something open to ratification or rejection by empirical experience' (233, see fn. 4). He goes on to quote Hume to the effect that there exists 'a sentiment common to all mankind which recommends the same object to general approbation and makes every or most men agree in the same opinion or decision

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concerning it.' (234–5, Hume Enquiry IV, 1) It is this sentiment leading to general agreement which for Hume and for Wiggins underpins common morality, particularly, it would seem, in its character of making it highly problematic to treat the other, the second person, as a thing. (Problematic, but unfortunately not impossible, because as Weil has already hinted it is possible for us humans to override our basic sense of the other as having a sacred space we are not to invade.)

We could begin a discussion of Wiggins' position by asking first about the extent to which the sentiment common to all mankind might produce moral agreement in practice. People whose world-view is very different might come to very different conclusions, even admitting to the sentiment, that you can't treat others as things. There are, to be sure, different types of case to consider here. People such as suicide bombers, terrorists more generally and the fabled sincere Nazi much discussed by R.M.Hare would certainly be ruled out as well beyond the moral pale by the Weil-Foot-Wiggins view. This no doubt shows the extent to which this view is an improvement on Hare's, but more still needs to be said about how Hume's 'general approbation' is to be secured in the face of the terrorist and the rest. Are the difficulties here just ones of practice, in the sense that we are saying that there is something that the suicide bomber or the Nazi actually knows and ought to admit, but which in their fanaticism they are simply overlooking? There is also a second question, about how far down into the detail of morality is the general orientation supposed to take us, on honestly disputed matters such as capital punishment and abortion, say. We can imagine two followers of Wiggins or Weil's general position coming to quite different conclusions here. It is not entirely clear whether this flexibility in application should be regarded as constituting a difficulty for *Ethics,* as opposed to being to its credit in still leaving room for the genuine moral disagreement and discussion which is part and parcel of our ethical life.

Leaving this second issue aside for now, we will focus for the rest of this discussion on the question of the person who, like the terrorist, simply refuses to be swayed in a particular case by an argument which appeals to the Weil intuition. It is not even that such a person may not be prepared to engage in discussion on the matter. A classic instance here, and one actually discussed by Simone Weil in a number of places (e.g. in 'Are We Struggling for Justice?' in her *Écrits de Londres,* and also in her *Selected Essays 1934–43*) is the so-called Melian Dialogue from Book V of

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Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In this dialogue, the Athenians are, with consummate politeness and appearance of rationality, telling the islanders of Melos (who have been neutral in the Peloponnesian War) that unless they submit forthwith to the rule of Athens they will be slaughtered or enslaved.

The dialogue and its implications shows why Simone Weil at least cannot remain content with the bill-board phenomenon considered in isolation from a wider context. *She* clearly regards the attitude evinced there as a problem for any ethic of solidarity and reciprocity, and it adds something to the general moral scepticism of Glaucon and Adeimantus, say, in *The Republic* (which Wiggins discusses extensively at the start of his *Ethics*). What the Melian Dialogue adds is the law of force. In the dialogue the Athenians say: 'Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men leads us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule wherever one can. This is not a law we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist forever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anyone else with the same power as us would act in precisely the same way.' The Athenians invite the Melians to submit—for their own good, and as part of the inevitable way things are, and almost as if the opposite amounts to an inconceivability.

In her discussion of this Weil makes the point that if the Athenians are in thrall to this 'law', so would the Melians be, were they to submit, as quasi willing victims of the law. She goes on to say what she already implied at the end of the bill-board passage, that this is a characteristic economy of human life—victims themselves acknowledging the law of the stronger—and one obviously in high tension with the second person view. This tension is actually the main subject matter of the essay on *The Iliad*.

As we know from Thucydides, the Melians did not submit and were slaughtered, which takes us straight into the world of 'The Iliad, Poem of Might'. One of the points Simone Weil makes there is that in *The Iliad*, it is not just that men become things (corpses) and women booty, but that both victims and victors are turned into animals by the killing frenzy into which they have to enter. Hence the characteristic Homeric imagery of the Greeks as cattle before the assault of a murderous lion when Hector routs them, or of the Trojans like uprooted trees swept by wind and fire as in a forest fire, the force of nature here being Agamemnon. We know from

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The Iliad that violence crushes whoever it touches, victors and victims alike. According to the Athenians and Hobbes, this is the inevitable condition of mankind.

Simone Weil herself was deeply religious in her attitude, and she sees something of the inhumanity she sees described so vividly and so unsentimentally by Homer as inherent in the divine act of creation itself: 'The act of Creation is not an act of power. It is an abdication. Through this act a kingdom was established other than the kingdom of God. *The reality of this world is constituted by the mechanism of matter and the autonomy of rational creatures*. It is a kingdom from which God has withdrawn. God having renounced being its king, can enter it only as a beggar.'

In his book *The Just Balance* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) Peter Winch talks of the 'apparent absurdity' of trying to discuss Simone Weil's ideas in abstraction from their religious dimension (and then, like so many who are fascinated by this rather terrifying figure, proceeds to do just that). Nevertheless, we can say that the italicised sentence in Weil's passage about creation just quoted is a brilliant and succinct description of the world as described by Kant. In their appeal to a law none of us have constituted, the Athenians are asserting the mechanism of matter, a view which receives its contemporary formulation in neo-Darwinism.

It is not, though, the full law of the Homeric gods, as Weil point out in her Iliad essay. In *The Iliad* the proud, above all the proud, are always brought down. Nor is it the law of the Gospels, which Weil sees as having its roots in Greek thought: 'Deposuit potentes de sede/ et exultavit humiles/ Exurientes implevit bonis/ et divites dimisist inanes' (Luke 1, 50 ff), part of the Magnificat, sung every day in Christian churches at Vespers.

But what of the autonomy of rational beings? The problem is with autonomy, if we stop there. For autonomy suggests that we make our own laws, that we invent right and wrong, In this picture of the world from which God has withdrawn, if we accept the stark pictures offered alike by Kantian philosophy and neo-Darwinism there is nothing but our wills, rational or otherwise, and the mechanisms of nature.

Following Weil and Foot, though, Wiggins suggests in *Ethics* there is another constraint on our autonomy than those of the mechanisms of nature, that in what used to be called a 'grammatical sense' we can't treat the person who crosses our path as if they were a street sign. That we often do treat them in just such a way, that they are often treated in just such a way, does nothing to show that we human beings do not have a power which belongs uniquely to

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us, as Simone Weil says; or as Wiggins puts it, we cannot avoid seeing ourselves as parties to an agreement *in solido*—though not, we should stress, an agreement any of us enters into voluntarily or consciously. It is as much something we ourselves did not make as is the law of force invoked by the Athenians. Human beings from whom this power is removed by the force of other wills, and who are deprived of the respect the participation in the agreement *in solido* entitles them to, become, from the 'point of view of logic, a contradiction', and that contradiction is a 'rent in the soul ... a death drawn out the length of a life', as Weil puts it in the Iliad essay (just after the passage quoted by Wiggins). Those subordinated in this way to might, are in the end subordinated to matter, animals or less than animals, subject to the laws of the Darwinian jungle or ultimately to those of the physics of matter.

The problem is, how can we uphold this insight against those who would destroy humanity, and who would either kill those who stand in their way, or, in Ruskin's terms, turn men into fragments of men, their humanity splintered and sacrificed on the altars of commerce? This is a problem obviously, for those faced with totalitarian political systems, but it is also a problem in different ways for liberal society ... and reinforced by all those siren voices, telling us just as the Athenians told the Melians not to be led astray by 'a false sense of honour, which often brings men to ruin when they are faced with some danger which affects their pride'.

On the contrary, says Simone Weil at the end of the Iliad essay, 'only he who knows the empire of might and who knows ***not*** to respect it, is capable of love and justice'. But she also tells us that might invites and receives retribution either from the gods or from destiny. She refers in this context to the stunning verse from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: 'Zeus, whoever he may be, if by this name it pleases him to be invoked ...; the Zeus who proclaims to us that through suffering comes understanding'; and also to the Zeus of *The Iliad* who presides over the scales of justice and who contemplates the two urns in which good and evil are weighed and meted out to humans. In general Weil analyses *The Iliad* in terms of the ever shifting and oscillating fortunes of victors and vanquished, the victors all being vanquished almost in the moment of their triumphs, even Achilles; the Achaeans themselves, according to legend reported by Thucydides conquered only 80 years after the destruction of Troy; and, we might add, and not according merely to legend, the Athenians on their knees only a generation after lecturing to the Melians on the law of force.

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Simone Weil says that in *The Iliad* none of those who live by force, transformed by might and the law of matter can escape destruction. All are destined for lives 'far from hot baths' (as Hector was when his body was being dragged round the walls of Troy by the vaunting Achilles); under the law of force all are captured by the paralysing bitterness which destroys the possibility of human tenderness that, among the warriors, is manifested (according to Weil) only by Patroclus (though we might also think here of Hector with Astyanax, and of Achilles momentarily with Priam): 'Whoever does not know just how far necessity and a fickle fortune hold the human soul under their domination cannot treat as equals, nor love as himself, those whom chance has separated from him by an abyss. The diversity of limitations to which men are subject creates the illusion that there are different species among them which cannot communicate with one another'. And there follows the sentence with which the previous paragraph began. It is thus that Simone Weil fills out her insight about the bill-board.

We can discuss how far her position requires the necessity provided by an equitable Zeus or cosmic fate to sustain it, or how far the subordination of us all to fickle fortune can take us. Following on from that we can wonder whether it is this sense of shared suffering before fickle fortune which is the basis of morality, of Hume's general approbation and (near) universal agreement, and of agreement *in solido*. This profound question is raised also by David Wiggins' fascinating *Ethics*.

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