

Normative Realism and Promethean Recognition: Simone Weil and the Russia–Ukraine War

Michail THEODOSIADIS

Abstract: *Mainstream analyses of the Russia-Ukraine war frequently rely on classical realism, constructivism, or Marxian models; these theories focus primarily on rational action and material interest. The present paper underscores a deeper phenomenological dimension of conflict. More precisely, it turns to the philosophy of Simone Weil, drawing from her reading of Homer's Iliad. This analysis uncovers the metaphysical nature of 'might' (la force), an overwhelming power that dehumanises all who come into contact with it. Might does not simply refer to physical coercion; ontologically, it is autonomous and operates beyond geopolitical necessity or rational judgment. Might petrifies both victims and aggressors, stripping them of moral agency. Applying this ontology to modern European defence policies (specifically rearmament and military deterrence), the study warns that political elites risk absorbing the very pathologies they fight against, sleepwalking into systemic escalation. To counter this destructive dynamic, the article explores Weil's readings of Aeschylus (Prometheus Bound and The Suppliants). Through the concept of 'Promethean recognition', which implies an awareness of universal human vulnerability, the paper supplies a normative counterweight rooted in an ethic of self-limitation. In short, the paper demonstrates that preventing total annihilation requires moving beyond military mastery to sustain the intermediate spaces of ethical interaction.*

Keywords: *Simone Weil, Russia–Ukraine War, Might, Iliad, Normative Realism.*

Introduction

Commentators on the war in Ukraine and the corresponding militarisation of European political rhetoric frequently draw on classical or structural realist models; they often mention Thucydides' Melian dialogue, Sun Tzu's strategic calculus, Hans Morgenthau's emphasis on the selfish human nature as the ultimate instigator of interstate war,¹ and

Kenneth Waltz's structural realism. The international system, realists claim, lacks a central authority to regulate state behaviour. In the absence of such a power, the selfish drive for power runs unchecked, pushing states to compete against each other in ways that often incite violent conflict². In this regard, Russia-Ukraine is interpreted as the consequence of great power antagonisms; western powers and allies

compete with their rivals for prestige and resources. On the other hand, constructivists reject this quasi-essentialist framework, interpreting the Russia-Ukraine conflict as the result of flawed norms adopted by international players. Their normative antidote to this condition of utter devastation is not transnational cooperation, which liberal authors deem as the ultimate response to national self-interest, but forms of interstate cooperation grounded in perceptions that prioritise harm reduction and human dignity. From this point of view comes an intriguing argument concerning the Russian invasion in Ukraine as a competition of identities; the war, writes Barry Buzan, is mainly about ‘the identity politics of all the parties involved’; territory and resources do matter; however, the deeper stakes are existential questions of identity, status, and civilisational belonging³. In much the same way, English School theorists speak of the ‘international society’ as a means for solidarity against the brutality of self-interest and forceful politics. Marxist and Marxian theories highlight the problem of power imbalances caused by the domination of Western capitalist forces: exploitation of the Third World and colonialism are the main causes of human misery across the planet. For example, David Kotz frames this war as the outcome of inter-imperialist rivalry between Russian economic oligarchy and the U.S. attempts to expand capitalism across the globe⁴. These theories focus primarily on

rational action, secular morality, and material interdependence. In contrast, Simone Weil’s thought unveils a deeper dimension; the causes and consequences of force in wartime are explored through a profoundly phenomenological lens.

To begin with, Weil shares one important claim with classical realism: the innate human selfishness is the main drive of conflict⁵. She recognised ‘the violent core of the political’⁶, while rejecting the legitimisation of unrestrained power (through force), advancing a normative aspiration to free politics ‘from its subjugation to force and to the legitimisation of the status quo’⁷. In other words, Weil called into question the logic of *raison d’état* (central to Realpolitik traditions). In doing so, she warned of the spiritual dimensions of violence. War unleashes force/might, which does not simply refer to physical violence; the latter coerces, compels, and threatens actors to comply with certain demands; however, might corresponds to more radical forms of spiritual violence, which humiliate and petrify both aggressors and victims by stripping them of any hope and capacity to resist dehumanisation⁸. In her landmark 1939 essay, *L’Iliade ou le Poème de la Force* (*The Iliad or a Poem of Force*), Weil defines might as an overwhelming power that ‘turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing’⁹; for ‘[w]hen exercised to the full ... it makes him a corpse’¹⁰. Might extinguishes human agency before life is taken. Crucially, might

poisons the minds of both war victims and winners; and even actors who justify its limited use against those who rely on violent means to oppress others could be gradually intoxicated by its corrupting power¹¹. Might operates under the illusion of mastery; for those who possess the means of physical coercion to deprive others of their freedom and agency quickly find themselves subordinated by the same powers they wielded. Weil mentions Thucydides' historical account that 'eighty years after the destruction of Troy the Achaeans in turn were conquered'¹². By grounding our critique in Weil's ontology of might, this article reveals an unsettling dynamic in the Russia-Ukraine war: key European decision-makers, in their support of the Ukrainian cause against a Russian aggression, increasingly exhibit a discourse governed by systemic escalation dynamics and moralization of military deterrence. Spearheaded by a rearming Germany, these strategic shifts risk drawing Europe into direct confrontation with Russia.

In elaborating upon this position, the article will first delve into Weil's analysis of might, unveiling an ontology grounded in dimensions beyond rational control. Consequently, the ultimate driver of human disaster is not geopolitical competition *tout court*, but a pathology of a meta-physical nature; this pathology (might) obeys its own laws and foundations. Section two further examines the metaphysics of might in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war; in turn,

section three identifies a response through Weil's reading of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and *The Suppliants*.

The Dehumanising Ontology of Might

What preoccupies Weil most in Homer's epic is the stark asymmetry of the captured warrior who, 'completely disabled, weak and disarmed,' begs the sword-holder for a reprieve that will not come: 'he is not by this act condemned to death; but only an instant of impatience on the part of the warrior suffices to deprive him of life'¹³. This is perfectly illustrated in the case of Hector's assassination at the hands of Achilles. In Book 22 we find Hector captured by the Achaean warrior; being unable to defend himself, he is reminded of his powerless position: 'Hector, do not prattle about agreements', says Achilles, for 'there are no pacts between lions and men'¹⁴. The cruelty of such a spectacle is offered with 'no consoling immortality, no faint halo of patriotic glory'¹⁵. When the empire of might reigns supreme, the victim stands with a weapon directed at him¹⁶. There is no divine intervention, providence, or heavenly protection to uphold morality and common decency, as also exemplified by the episode of Lycaon's assassination in Book 21, where Achilles 'lifted and poised his long spear' but 'Lycaon grabbed at his knees / and crouched so the spear flew by to hit the ground / where it stood upright, still craving

human flesh. / One of Lycaon's hands clasped Achilles' legs, / the other clenched the spear and would not let go'¹⁷. Lycaon, powerless and disarmed, begs for his life: "'Achilles, I beg you to pity me!'¹⁸. Lycaon attempts to persuade Achilles with the following words: 'I face you as a suppliant, owed respect / because you and I shared Demeter's grain / the day you seized me in the orchard rows, / then took me far from father and friends to sell, / in Lemnos, my price a hundred oxen's worth. / I bought freedom for three times that, and this day / is only the twelfth since I returned home, / weary from trials'¹⁹. Homer attempts to drive the attention of his reader to Lycaon's distress: 'Now you have me again. / Such is my dismal fate'²⁰. Priam's son knows that his final moment is fast approaching: 'Lycaon listened and knew he was doomed ... The double-edged blade / sank deep in Lycaon's neck. The Trojan fell / flat on his face, his dark blood soaking the earth'²¹. But 'Achilles drew his sword / and struck the collarbone.

Ultimately, these Iliadic encounters reveal that words of justice and supplications to shared humanity remain impotent against the absolute empire of might; wisdom and knowledge are impotent against those who uphold their prestige and possess a monopoly on the use of the means of unchecked force²². In other words, a combatant who wields supreme material power and is driven by rage and passion for domination is impervious to normative appeals and

reciprocal pacts. However, the problem of might, '[t]he true hero [and] the real subject ... of the Iliad'²³, is not merely its capacity to impose arbitrary coercion; might inherits a dehumanizing ontology, which oppresses not merely by taking advantage of physical strength in order to eradicate life. First, '[t]he might which kills outright is an elementary and coarse form of might', Weil argued²⁴. From that power which transforms humans into things by killing them, another 'more prodigious' power proceeds; this particular power converts victims into things while they are still alive²⁵. A disarmed man 'upon whom a weapon is directed becomes a corpse before he is touched' by the sword; and only a moment ago the same man could dream and hope²⁶. Most crucially, it actively deprives the moral agency of both victim and the oppressor. This is vividly illustrated in the execution of Hector²⁷. Herein, we find Hector mortally wounded, begging for a fair burial; his appeal meets a void. Achilles responds as if Hector was already an object, and at that moment 'the curtain of death' drops, and his soul flies 'to Hades'²⁸. Thus (for Weil) might petrifies and extinguishes human agency²⁹. Before his death Hector appears frozen 'almost as does the sight of a corpse'³⁰; he senses the world of Hades, the underworld of the dead where persons appear as *skiai* (shadows)³¹, before his life is taken.

For Levy, '[i]f someone can be made corpse-like without having

been touched', then he has not been 'compelled through inflicted violence. So, while we may say that sometimes a person is killed through violence', the same person becomes 'a corpse, or a thing' not merely because of this violence *per se*³²; for those touched by might are no longer animated by their own hopes and dreams; they have 'neither the power to refuse nor the capacity to consent; both are lost. ... The consolidated effect is to make of someone something that does not resist, is unresistant'³³. In peace-time, '[t]he capacity for consent, the power to refuse, the capacity for judgment and bodily presence all combine in a person to effect an influence on another, however subtle'³⁴. Hence, Weil's point is that 'when a human becomes a thing, it is as if he were seen but not noticed'³⁵; that is, the subdued person, having been completely stripped of agency and power, is incapable of blocking or limiting the actions of the mighty; having been reduced to *skiai* (shadows), they are visible only as an outline, devoid of full humanity, and deprived of the ability to think or understand. In other words, the ontological reality of the inherent cruelty of might does not merely point to the cruelty of violence committed on behalf of means that serve ends; *la force* is not the physical idea of energy or movement (*kinesis*) 'inherent in or imparted to a directed object'³⁶. Might is an overwhelming power, severed from a transcendent anchoring that promptly champions love and collective solidarity; it operates

as an immaterial force; it instrumentalises the most demonic inner incentives, grounded in self-blindness, vanity, and falsity. Thus, it unleashes the most unholy spirits, which normalise and exalt desolation and ruin. More severely, it is the unexpected moment that elevates *hubris* and eradicates not simply grace itself, but the very possibility through which grace and God's love can create a schism of light to humble human lust. This normalisation is perfectly illustrated in the 'extreme savagery and utter inhumanity' of Achilles' move to behead twelve Trojan youths on Patroclus' tomb³⁷. Herein, Achilles not only has become a force of sheer destructive energy, annihilating whatever gets in his way³⁸; he kills 'as naturally as we cut flowers for a tomb'³⁹; possessed by the unholy yearning for blind revenge in the face of the loss of his friend, Patroclus, at the hands of Hector, he is denied of the world of concrete meaning and affection;⁴⁰ he ravages, destroys, and eradicates the conditions of ethical coexistence. Seemingly, this normalisation of destruction and death is only an imitation of the cruelty of the nature; by allowing his intense and violent rage to burn his intellect, the Achaean hero imitates the mechanical and conflictual relations of material interaction that characterize the life of the universe and all natural (or pre-political) environments. In this regard, desolation is no longer a process of strategic or instrumental thinking, guided by the ultimate objective of

survival, hegemony, and utter domination within a dog-eats-dog world; rather, it is not an automatic process, occurring in the same way as nature attacks her prey with bitter indifference and lack of consolation. However, this physical/nature-like force is also accompanied by an almost metaphysical power, which turns the cruelty of nature into a weapon that strips both victims and aggressors of the capacity to apply individual judgments impartially. Anger alone (Achilles' *mēnis*) plays a minimal role in the prevalence of this dehumanising *hubris*; for anger and wrath are accompanied by the intoxicating powers of might. In other words, might is not *physis* (nature)⁴¹, although it operates through *physis* itself; it is a power that manifests through the sword, but falls short of being the property of the swordholder.

According to Levy, might operates in the space between two people (the armed and the unarmed);⁴² Weil's assertion that 'only an instant of impatience on the part of the warrior suffices to deprive [the] life [of the captured victim]'⁴³ firmly validates this approach that might is inherently relational; for an isolated individual has no capacity to animate such a power. However, might is not confined to the physical dynamic of the armed versus the unarmed (the space between two people); its reach extends far beyond the realm of conflict of bodies. It is a pervasive presence and transcends these material conditions; it is a *meta*-physical

force, an enduring element of human existence that finds expression through matter, including means of phonetic communication (rhetoric and speech). Hence, it manifests across every domain (in public discourse, in conditions that compel submission) and remains an imperishable fixture of the human condition as such. Whether lying dormant or exalted through speech and deed, its presence remains permanently woven into the human mind, soul, and condition. Let us consider, again, the episodes of Hector, Lycaon, or the twelve Trojans whom Achilles brutally slays in his rage; here, even anger and Achilles' natural instincts are subordinated to the hands of might; the warrior is, thus, turned into an 'unthinking' object that spreads utter ruin. Crucially, Weil argues that even '[a] moderate use of might, by which alone man may escape being caught in the machinery of its vicious circle, would demand a more than human virtue, one no less rare than a constant dignity in weakness'⁴⁴. In other words, the *Iliad* warns that even a man of strong and heroic physique 'is never absolutely strong' and, interestingly enough, 'nor the weak man absolutely weak ... [However] each one is ignorant of this'⁴⁵. When might reigns supreme, not only do the strong and powerful give up their capacity for judgment; the weak persuade themselves to compromise with their precarious status as if they are of a primitive and unholy origin. While the strong, in the pursuit of supremacy and eternal

glory (*kleos*) turn a blind eye to human frailty, and (subsequently) to their own susceptibility to *hubris*, the weak succumb to an equal delusion; conceiving of themselves as lost and doomed entities, trapped in a tragic fate where they are bound to suffer what they must. However, the desire to overwhelm such a condition of sheer servitude can easily be co-opted by the iron will of might, regardless of whether vengeance accompanies this endeavor. This endeavour substitutes the brutality of coercive subordination with a power formation that can be barely distinguished from the old structure that has been subjected to demolition.

From the Homeric Battlefield to the Mechanics of Escalation

In the words of Morgenthau, '[a]ncient tragedians and Biblical prophets [often] reveal the ... [harsh] realities of international affairs'⁴⁶. Morgenthau's rejection of 'historical optimism' echoes Weil's bleak warning that progress (as noted earlier) is probably an illusory belief, grounded in the false assumption that moral improvement will someday emancipate humanity from the dread of might. More to the point: the international system, Morgenthau and classical realists assert, is anarchic; lacking a central power to impose order, states compete for prestige and resources; necessity rules and dominates all international political decision-making processes. In this competitive world, necessity and national

survival become the ultimate priority. Nonetheless, the deeply embedded, essence-shaping, and absolute ontological metaphysics of might direct our attention to the existence of another dimension: the dehumanising consequences of war cannot be simply reduced to the rigid laws of necessity; for the ontology of might itself, unleashed by military aggression, reveals the existence of a deeper layer of human interaction; one that paves the way for the endless perpetuation of conflict dynamics⁴⁷.

Judging the war in Ukraine from this lens, one does not only confront the issue of a 'just resistance' against the brutal military invasion, orchestrated by the Russian political class. More to the point: a realist angle would attribute the war to the intensity of interstate antagonisms, assuming that both the state of Ukraine and its western alliances as well as Russia have been struggling to advance their geopolitical prestige and access to resources in Crimea and the Eastern provinces of Ukraine. Conversely, normative perspectives would anchor their analysis to the legitimacy of the Ukrainian resistance, citing the blatant violation of the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine and the expansionist intentions of Moscow; this framework has its roots in the tradition of 'just war' theory, consisting of the following two tenets: *ius ad bellum*, which advocates that all wars in order to be deemed 'just' must be waged as a last resort, initiated with the right intention (the right to resist a greater evil

like a foreign invasion), and has to possess a clear likelihood of success. The second tenet revolves around the principles of *ius post bellum*, which is concerned with post-war realities and dictates whether the conflict establishes a just, stable, and lasting peace⁴⁸. The Ukrainian resistance seems to perfectly match the above criteria to be considered ‘just’ in the face of Russian aggression. It calls into question the realist insistence on rigid and immutable geopolitical dynamics (necessity and competition) for turning a blind eye on human suffering. However, the use of might and its inherent dynamic to perpetuate conflict by depriving the agency of both aggressors and victims issues a clear warning: if might exerts its influence over human consciousness beyond rational control and since its power to spread and penetrate the minds of both aggressors and victims, eradicating agency and ultimately depriving the will-to-think and judge according to impartial normative standards applied, then even a morally justified defense risks absorbing the very pathology it fights against. In the case of Ukraine’s struggle against Russian expansionism, this resistance risks falling into an abyss where the possibility of a non-violent future is entirely devoured by the dehumanising power it is impelled to invoke.

To be sure, the escalating rhetoric of European leaders and their increasingly alarmist posture towards Russia can be understood as a validation of the realist (and neorealist)

explanation of conflict, grounded in fear and the survival imperative of the state. Conversely, the ontology of might exposes the darkest dimension of this warlike posture: the existence of intoxicating and seductive powers, which suggest an insidious and gradual cognitive drift among European statesmen that subtly conditions political elites to treat escalation as inevitable and sleepwalk into a general conflagration. To escape this trajectory, it becomes necessary to unveil the possibility of dismantling the metaphysics of might. To this end, the analysis will take Weil’s examination of might in *The Iliad* several steps further, entering into a deeper engagement with her readings of Aeschylus’s *Suppliants* and *Prometheus Bound*.

Prometheus and the Common World: Might and Recognition in an Era of Great Power Rivalry

The turning point that Weil treats as a ‘rare moment of grace’ in the whole poem of the *Iliad*,⁴⁹ is found in Book 24, which describes the encounter of Achilles with king Priam. This response to the pervasive vulgarity of might that plagues the Iliadic world⁵⁰, emerges as a moment of revelation. In brief, this episode describes the two protagonists mourning the loss of their loved ones: Achilles has lost his friend Patroclus at the hands of Hector; and Priam grieves for Hector, who was assassinated by Achilles. Both con-

front 'the painful longing and the painful grief that mortals ... suffer'⁵¹. This tragic human experience of loss and destruction is described in Book 22, where Hector's wife (Andromache) 'summoned fair-haired handmaidens', and 'told them / to stand a tripod over fire and prepare / a hot bath for Hector's return from battle. / She did not know that, far from the bath they drew, / Athena had wrought death through Achilles' hands'⁵². Hector is already dead; he was slain on the battlefield. The comforts (hot bath) being prepared for him serve no purpose anymore. The 'hot bath' here represents the deep yearning for peace and reconciliation. However, this longing is violently negated by the realities of the human condition, namely, by the deep lust for prestige and glory, which blind actors with the delusion that might can be leveraged to secure dominance without exposing the instigator to reciprocal ruin. Homer considers this persistent feature as 'the tragic truth of human condition into the matchless songs of his great poem'⁵³. In other words, this 'tragedy' is encapsulated in the claim that '[n]early all the Iliad takes place far from hot baths. Nearly all of human life has always passed far from hot baths'⁵⁴. Behind this precarious existence lies what Weil calls Thucydides' 'terrible formula': 'By a necessity of nature, all beings, whoever they are, exploit to the fullest extent all the power in their command'⁵⁵. She warns against the 'dreamers who anticipate a world free from might 'thanks to pro-

gress'⁵⁶. For them, the *Iliad* appears as 'an historical document' to challenge their expectations; '[n]o one in the *Iliad* is spared, just as no one on earth escapes' the hands of might⁵⁷, whose appetites conquer mind and soul once the explicit and unconditional awareness of the human capacity for error is undermined by arrogant and selfish passions. This awareness and reconciliation with vulnerability and imperfection erects fences against the violent eruption and prevalence of this destructive impulse to perfect destruction (as I will show later on).

The episode of Achilles and Priam serves as a moment of emotional release (*catharsis*), arising when both protagonists come to terms with their inherent vulnerability as mortals. This recognition sparks the moment of the clearest rejection of the brutal ontology in which the savagery of might finds moral legitimacy. In short, Achilles faces the reality of human frailty, which in the Iliadic world is repeatedly neglected as actors often blind themselves to assume they are fully sealed from destruction and suffering⁵⁸. Both Achilles and Priam recognise that 'humans cause themselves ... sorrows' (death and destruction);⁵⁹ and both become aware that these sorrows spring from the destructive spirits of mutual enmity. In attempting to set aside their persistent yearning for supremacy and eternal glory, they allowed friendship 'to brim [their] hearts'⁶⁰. This insight extends directly into Weil's reading

of Aeschylean tragedy. In her reading of *Prometheus Bound*, Weil avoids common interpretations of Zeus as a tyrant who punishes Prometheus for his act of theft: 'Prometheus is the preceptor of men, who has taught them all things. Here he (the preceptor) is said to be Zeus. That is all the same thing; the two are really one. It is in crucifying Prometheus that Zeus has opened the way of wisdom to men'⁶¹. The 'hostility between Prometheus and Zeus is only an appearance';⁶² for they are 'one and the self-same God' and they hint at their future reunification⁶³. The 'reconciliation between Prometheus and Zeus shall again come freely from both sides: σπεύδων σπεύδοντι'⁶⁴. Moreover, Prometheus suffers alone, and 'he has an explosion of pain which leaves no doubt as to the carnal character of his suffering'⁶⁵. This emphasis of 'carnal suffering' reveals the intense anguish of the human world to which Prometheus is attached; he senses, feels, and shares the profound pain and injustice that humanity confronts, deprived of comfort and solace (hot baths). The reconciliation between Prometheus, as a symbol of humanity, with Zeus, a benevolent father who represents 'a high moral ideal' that defends justice and lays his benignant hand to heal the suffering of innocent victims offers a philosophical vision of impartial justice pitted against the endemic reign of might over human existence.

Furthermore, in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, Zeus plays the role of the innocent sufferer, as summarised in the

following phrase: 'ἱκτηρίας, ἀγάλαματ' αἰδοίου Διός'⁶⁶. The word αἰδοῖος 'refers to the particular sort of respect which we owe to an unfortunate being when he implores us'⁶⁷. Since Zeus is depicted as a suppliant, the sense of respect and compassion he advocates does not refer to voluntary expressions of pity; rather, it is anchored in profoundly settled obligation; that is, 'the supplication of a sufferer comes from God himself, and that one cannot push the sufferer away without offending God. The Greeks stated that thought by an admirable expression, "Zeus suppliant", not Zeus the protector of suppliants but "Zeus the suppliant"'⁶⁸. Upon combining this reading with her approach of Zeus in *Prometheus Bound*, who is also identical with Prometheus, we can assume that the suppliant is also represented by the figure of Prometheus himself. Furthermore, this reading of Prometheus can be supplemented by a perspective partially inspired by Weil, which frames the titan as both a symbol of human (mainly political) agency and a metric for gauging the intrinsic frailty of the human condition⁶⁹. From this it follows that since the suppliant is represented by Prometheus, and since Prometheus implies agency and capacity for action, it follows that the suppliant has agency; that is, the victim maintains their status as a human being, displaying self-respect both towards themselves and the aggressor; the latter is prompted to re-evaluate their words and deeds, resisting the self-

degradation imposed by the metaphysics of might. Ultimately, the crucial counterweight to the dehumanising reality of might is the ontology of recognition (intrinsic to the figure of Prometheus): recognition re-establishes human dignity at the very heart of the power dynamic.

To define it properly, recognition revolves around the unsettling human capacity for *hubris* and exaggeration;⁷⁰ recognition leads to grace, where all selfish desires and pursuits for supremacy are extinguished by the transcendent message of love and compassion. More precisely, Weil's mystical objective is attention, which empties from the human mind all selfish desires that incite enmity and justify the exercise of force over others. In doing so, it makes space for God's Grace to fill the void. Grace offers true deliverance and salvation⁷¹. However, this view of grace within Weil's reading of Prometheus is not merely an exercise in spiritual quietism; rather, it is a reminder that human beings possess an innate capacity to generate possibilities for moral judgment once they abstain from illusions of invulnerability and supremacy and anchor their pursuits to high moral ideals, situated above the material world of vanity. This deliverance is represented by Prometheus' unification with the benevolent Zeus. Put otherwise, human beings (represented by Prometheus) must recognise their frail nature and simultaneously attempt to overcome their susceptibility to the tempting and intoxicating powers of might by

approaching a high moral ideal that inspires mutual respect (and self-respect). Prometheus's unification with Zeus suggests that this high moral orientation must operate across both inner and external realms. Internally, it requires human beings to understand that the pursuit of physical power and advantage is a toxic illusion: a sword-holder, a fierce and merciless warrior may be unexpectedly dehumanized as a victim; a glorified and 'just' resistance warrior may ultimately become a reckless predator, perpetuating the same oppression he initially condemned as morally repugnant. Externally, this high moral ideal, which need not be the Christian God exclusively, but any transcendent principle that purifies the mind and legitimises self-limitation, intervenes in political *praxis*. In doing so, it fulfills what Weil identified as the ultimate task: not merely promising perpetual peace, an almost impossible imperative, but sustaining the 'intermediate state' between war and peace to safeguard the common world from absolute destruction⁷².

This emphasis on recognition does not signify a departure from realism; rather, it injects into the heart of realist philosophy a normative dimension. That is, Weil supplements the descriptive reality of the realist framework with a worldview that underscores the importance of safeguarding the conditions that prevent the consolidation of pathologies through which might absorbs human agency. Michael Walzer famously

objected to realism, which (in his mind) obscures ‘moral and strategic question[s]’ by overemphasizing structural inevitability, downplaying the importance of deliberate human choices in igniting a war⁷³. As he notes, ‘[j]udgments of necessity ... are always retrospective in ... the work of [realist] historians’, who erase the immediate agency and accountability of political actors⁷⁴. He develops this argument in light of the massacre of Melos, described by Thucydides:⁷⁵ the inhabitants of the island of Melos were ‘Spartan colonists who, unlike the other islanders, would not submit to Athenian domination: at first they remained neutral and took no part in the war, but later were forced into an openly hostile stance when the Athenians tried to coerce them by ravaging their land’⁷⁶. Cleomedes and Tisias, two Athenian ‘commanding generals . . . sent forward spokesmen to negotiate with the Melians’⁷⁷. During the debate, Athenian military leadership pressed Melos to accept an alliance, framing it as a mutually beneficial arrangement for regional defense⁷⁸. They warned that refusing to yield would carry far worse consequences, emphasizing that Melos’s limited power left them virtually helpless against total annihilation⁷⁹. In response, the Melians contended that this agreement would be ‘proportionately in your interest much more than ours, given the massive retaliation you would face as an example to others should you fall from power’⁸⁰. The Melians placed their trust in their

strong ties with Sparta, assuming that their shared friendship would compel the latter to intervene and balance out their military weaknesses⁸¹. Succumbing to Athenian pressure meant forfeiting this alliance and instantly turning Sparta into an enemy. Furthermore, if Athens ever fell, Melos would be left totally exposed to Spartan retribution⁸². When it became clear the islanders would not yield to the Athenian demands, the Athenian army launched an assault, destroying the city, executing the adult male population, and selling the women and children into slavery⁸³. Walzer writes that the ‘responsibility’ for the assassination of all the men of Melos as well as of the enslavement of women and children does not rest solely on the Athenian generals; this cruel decision was not taken in Melos but in the democratic assembly at Athens⁸⁴. For Walzer, destruction and suffering are not always determined by “‘a necessity of nature,” but by the opinions’ held by citizens ‘and then by the decisions they freely make, individually and collectively’⁸⁵. Yet, does this indicate that the Athenians forfeited their agency by giving in to the rule of might? To make matters even more complex: does human agency inherently possess the capacity to act morally? Democratic theory could not be more straightforward: freedom of (and for) action does not preclude *hubris*⁸⁶. However, the social and political reality shaped by the corruptive ontology of might does not exclusively influence human judgment in such a way as to nor-

malise oppression; nor does it compete in terms of destructiveness the role of geopolitical necessity. Might makes both human decision-making and structural necessity subordinate to its own metaphysics. Since might is neither an artifact of agency nor an instrument of necessity but an autonomous unyielding power, once it succeeds to subvert human consciousness to its own destructive whirl, it petrifies judgment and subordinates sovereign choice to its own dehumanising image.

Conclusion

The true peril of the contemporary geopolitical moment, evidenced in the escalating dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine war, is not merely that states are trapped in a spiral of structural necessity and antagonism, or simply the problem of flawed human judgment; both political agency and geopolitical logic, when succumbed to the destructive tendencies of might, are blindly drawn into a perpetual logic of self-annihilation. To resist this cognitive and spiritual drift, international relations theory must look beyond the binary of realist inevitability and liberal moralism; scholars must recognize the existence of pathologies operating beneath the surface of rational judgment and emotional appeal; these pathologies are integrally connected with the ex-

istence of humanity as such. Might, perhaps the most vivid and destructive pathology (according to Weil), can be averted when political thought recovers the Promethean ontology of recognition. In doing so, a normative counterweight emerges: on the one hand, there is an insistence on human frailty; the whole history of humanity (as Weil claimed) lives beyond 'hot baths'; hence, there is *hubris*, tragedy, and destruction. But at the same time, an ethic of self-limitation that restores the moral dimensions of human agency, particularly when it comes to political decision-making.

In other words, a non-violent future does not entirely depend on the vain pursuit of military mastery. Moreover, while international collaboration (the liberal antidote to transnational competition) adds a crucial layer of protection against the savageness of interstate conflict, it does not address a deeper reality: that certain forces remain beyond automatic human control. Marxism is profoundly rooted in secular ethics, neglecting that true restraint requires not simply economic equality and wealth redistribution; one needs to recognize these inherent limits of the human condition; one needs to cultivate the spiritual and political capacity to sustain the intermediate spaces of ethical relationality before the unthinking mechanics of might consume the common world entirely.

Notes

- ¹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1948, pp. 4-9, p. 13, p. 220; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952, p. 99; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* New York, 1962, pp. 45-7; Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History*, Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- ² Hans Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, pp.4-9, p. 13, pp. 16-8; Reinhold Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-7; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 3.
- ³ Barry Buzan. „Why the conflict over Ukraine will be a long one”, *London School of Economics, Online Blog*, 2023.
- ⁴ David Kotz. „Imperialism and the Ukraine War”, *Review of Radical Political Economics* 2023 55(4), pp. 568–576.
- ⁵ Roy Pierce, „Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil”, *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 77, No. 4, 1990; Patrick Patterson and Lawrence Schmidt, „The Christian Materialism of Simone Weil”, Jane Doering and Eric Springsted, (eds), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2004; Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2010, pp. 62-4; Cristina Basili, „Simone Weil pensatrice del reale”, *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia Politica*, Vol. 3, 2022.
- ⁶ Cristina Basili, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-8.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 198,
- ⁸ David Levy, „What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*?”, *Philosophical Investigations* Vol. 43, 2020, pp.21-22.
- Furthermore, the French word *la force* (Weil's original) is often translated as 'might'. Consider, for example, the English version of her *Iliad or the Poem of Force*, included in the collection *Intimations of Christianity* (2024). Other versions retain the term 'force' (cf. *Anthology*, 2005). However, Levy assumes that 'in contemporary English, 'might' and 'force' are unfamiliar synonyms (David Levy, „What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*?”, pp.21); force is mainly associated with physical violence, which coerces, compels, and threatens actors to comply with certain demands; in contrast, Weil's *la force* refers to almost metaphysical forms of dehumanising forms of power, which petrify their victims by stripping them of any hope, agency, and capacity to resist (*ibidem* pp. 21-2).
- ⁹ Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, Routledge, 2024, p. 25.
- ¹⁰ *Ibidem*.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.25; Lisa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction*, I.B. Tauris 2014; Peter Goodchild P., 2017. Weil's Boat: On Becoming and Being, In Rebeca Rozelle-Stone (ed.), *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy*, Rowman & Littlefield International. 2017.
- ¹² Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 24.
- ¹⁴ Homer, *Iliad*, Book 22, p. 262.
- ¹⁵ Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.27.
- ¹⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, Book 21, 66-72
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

- 19 Homer, *Iliad*, Book 21, pp. 75-80.
- 20 *Ibidem*, pp. 81-83.
- 21 *Ibidem*, pp. 116-89.
- 22 In a similar vein, Haig Patapan discusses Aesop's fable about a lamp approached by a hungry wolf while peacefully drinking water on the bank of a woodland stream. The wolf unjustly accuses the lamb of stirring up the water. The lamb, in response, calmly repudiates, highlighting the impossibility of stirring the water as it resides downstream while the wolf occupies the upstream position. Despite these valid explanations, the wolf devours the lamb. Aesop's tale suggests that wisdom has little influence in the 'world of the powerful. Wolves and lambs of course do not speak or argue, and hungry wolves must perforce eat lambs'. Haig Patapan, *Modern Philosopher Kings*, Edinburgh University Press 2023, p. 16. Hence, those who possess supreme force exercise it purely to serve their own ends, remaining entirely indifferent to considerations of justice. In classical realism, this view is echoed in the perception that in this competitive world of politics, morality and wisdom play limited roles; states are advocates of national prestige and self-interest; they strive to dominate in transnational competitive environments, without adhering to normative constraints and ideals. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, *op. cit.*, p. 4, pp. 8-9, p. 13.
- 23 Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- 24 *Ibidem*, p. 26.
- 25 *Ibidem*, p. 24.
- 26 *Ibidem*.
- 27 Homer, *Iliad*, Book 22, pp. 248-366.
- 28 *Ibidem*, pp. 361-362.
- 29 Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- 30 *Ibidem*, p. 28.
- 31 Homer, *Iliad*, Book 23, 103-4; Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11, 207, p. 476.
- 32 David Levy, „What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*?”, pp. 22-23.
- 33 *Ibidem*, p. 23.
- 34 *Ibidem*, p. 23.
- 35 *Ibidem*, p. 24.
- 36 *Ibidem*, p. 25.
- 37 S. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. University of California Press 1984, p. 47.
- 38 Michail Theodosiadis, „Chreos and Philotês in Homeric Ethics: Beyond Enlightenment and Reverence”. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10(2), 269-304, 2025, p. 297.
- 39 Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, 35. For Weil '[t]he necessity that belongs to war is terrible, wholly different from that belonging to peaceful works; the soul only submits to the necessity of war when escape from it is impossible; and so long as the soul does escape, it lives irresponsible days, empty of necessity, days of frivolity, of dream, arbitrary and unreal'. When the necessity of war diminishes every moral responsibility, danger becomes only an abstraction; and 'the lives which one takes seem like toys broken by a child, and no more important; heroism is a theatrical pose soiled by artificial braggings (*Ibidem*, p. 41).
- 40 Michail Theodosiadis, Chreos and Philotês in Homeric Ethics: *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300.
- 41 David Levy, „What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*?”, p. 25

- ⁴² For Levy, might 'is not intrinsic to or located in the mighty, because the very same warrior in relation to a subdued person is mighty, but is not mighty in relation to an equal or in different circumstances, e.g. where he is unarmed. That is, might in Weil's sense depends not on a property of those who wield it – as with a ball in motion – but on a relation between people' („What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*?", p. 24).
- ⁴³ Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 40.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 34.
- ⁴⁶ Mervyn Frost, Tragedy, „Ethics, and International Relations", Toni Erskine, Richard Ned Lebow, and James O. Freedman (eds), *Tragedy and International Relations*. Palgrave MacMillan 2012, p. 22.
- ⁴⁷ In Weil's thought, even this form of necessity is not purely material (grounded in the pursuit of resources, weapons, or economic capacity); for it is amplified by prestige, the symbolic or imaginary recognition that makes power seem greater than its material base. This creates an internal contradiction: material resources are finite. However, the struggle for prestige and domination is limitless. As a result, power tends to escape its proper role as a means, and instead becomes an end in itself. In her later reflection (*Let Us Not Start the Trojan War Again*), she underscores how prestige is inseparable from power and inherently destabilizing, since it can never reach equilibrium; every gain for one is an affront to another. Thus, history seems locked in a cycle of endless conflict, broken only (if at all) by what she calls 'miracles'. Cristina Basili, „Simone Weil pensatrice del reale", *op. cit.*, p. 202
- ⁴⁸ David Corey and Charles Daryl, *The Just War Tradition: An Introduction*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books 2012, p. 6.
- ⁴⁹ Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 50.
- ⁵¹ Peter Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue: Creating the Foundations of Classical Civilization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014, p. 194.
- ⁵² Homer, *Iliad*, Book 22, pp. 442-446.
- ⁵³ Miklos Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 103.
- ⁵⁴ Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ⁵⁵ Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Spectre of Self-Perpetuating Force*, Indiana University of Notre Dame Press 2010, p. 62
- ⁵⁶ Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 51.
- ⁵⁸ McCoy, M. B. *Woundedness, Narrative, and Community in the Iliad*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, 33. Achilles 'initially resists the vulnerability of both himself and the other Greeks' but fully embraces it when he is brought to face with the universality of human suffering in Book 24. *Ibidem.*, p.x.
- ⁵⁹ Peter Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, p. 195.
- ⁶⁰ Simone Weil, *Intimation of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

- ⁶¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 57.
- ⁶² *Ibidem.*, p. 68.
- ⁶³ *Ibidem.*, p. 67.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 69.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 60.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibidem.*, p. 192.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 71.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 70.
- ⁶⁹ Michail Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism: Prometheus in Political Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 4-5, pp. 19-20.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 20.
- ⁷¹ Through attention we destroy the causes of enmity within ourselves. Cf. Adrian Poole, A. 1992. War and Grace: The Force of Simone Weil on Homer, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 2(1) 1992, p. 8; Roberto Esposito, R. 2017. *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?*, New York: Fordham University Press 2017, p. 5; For more regarding grace, cf. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, London: Penguin Books, 2002.
- ⁷² Simone Weil, *Selected Essays 1934-1943*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 181-2.
- ⁷³ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books 2005, p. 8.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibidem.*
- ⁷⁵ Weil referred to this episode of Melos five times in her Notes. Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Spectre of Self-perpetuating Force*, op. cit., p. 62
- ⁷⁶ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 5, p. 83.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibidem.*
- ⁷⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 97.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*, pp. 87, 89, 93.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 90.
- ⁸¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 104.
- ⁸² *Ibidem.*, p. 91.
- ⁸³ *Ibidem.*, p. 116.
- ⁸⁴ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, op. cit., p. 8; Michail Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism*, op. cit., p. 57.
- ⁸⁵ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, op. cit., p. 8.
- ⁸⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007, p. 93; James Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 18; John Matsusaka, *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 207; Michail Theodosiadis, *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism*, op. cit., p. 18.

Bibliography

Books

- AHRENSDORF, Peter, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue: Creating the Foundations of Classical Civilization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014.
- CASTORIADIS, C., *Figures of the Thinkable*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2007.
- COREY, D., Charles, D., and Daryl, J., *The Just War Tradition: An Introduction*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2012.
- DOERING, E., J., *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*,

- Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 2010.
- DURANT, W., and Durant, A., *The Lessons of History*, H. Wolff, New York, 1968.
- ESPOSITO, R., *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2017.
- HOMER, *Iliad*, Translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.
- KLOPPENBERG, J. T., *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.
- MATSUSAKA, J., *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2020.
- MEARSHEIMER, J. J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001.
- MORGENTHAU, H. J., *Politics Among Nations*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1948.
- MCCOY, M. B., *Woundedness, Narrative, and Community in the Iliad*, Oxford University Press Oxford, 2013.
- MCCULLOUGH, L., *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2014.
- NIEBUHR, R., *Christianity and Power Politics*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952.
- IDEM, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York, 1962.
- SCHEIN, S., *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*, University of California Press, 1984.
- THEODOSIADIS, M., *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism: Prometheus in Political Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2025.
- VETÓ, M., *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1994.
- WEIL, S. 1962. *Selected Essays 1934-1943*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962.
- IDEM, *Gravity and Grace*, Penguin Books, London, 2002.
- IDEM, *An Anthology*, Penguin Books, London, 2005.
- IDEM, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, Routledge, London, 2024.

Articles and studies

- BASIL, C., Simone Weil pensatrice del reale, *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia Politica*. 3, pp.195-218. DOI: 10.36253/rifp-2023, 2022.
- FROST, M., „Tragedy, Ethics, and International Relations”, in Erskine, T., Lebow, R. N, and Freedman, O. J. Presidential Professor Emeritus) (eds), *Tragedy and International Relations*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, pp. 41-43.
- GOODCHILD, P., Weil's Boat: On Becoming and Being, In Rozelle-Stone, A., R. (ed.) *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, pp. 13–36.
- LEVY, D., K., What is *la force* in Simone Weil's *Iliad*? *Philosophical Investigations*, 43(1-2), pp. 19–39, 2020, DOI: 10.1111/phn.12257.
- PATTERSON, P. and SCHMIDT, E., L., „The Christian Materialism of Simone Weil”, in DOERING, J., and SPRINGSTED, O., E., (eds). *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 2004.

- PIERCE, R., *Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil*. Political Science Quarterly, 77(4), 1962, pp. 505-525, DOI: 10.2307/2146244
- POOLE, A., „War and Grace: The Force of Simone Weil on Homer”, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 2(1), 1992, pp. 1-15.
- THEODOSIADIS, M., „Chreos and Philotês in Homeric Ethics: Beyond Enlightenment and Reverence”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10(2), 2025, pp.269–304.

Online resources

- BUZAN, B., Why the conflict over Ukraine will be a long one. London School of Economics (Online Blog), 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2023/05/09/why-the-conflict-over-ukraine-will-be-a-long-one/> .
- ROZELLE-STONE, A., R., Simone Weil, in Zalta, E., N., (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/simone-weil/>.

