

**SIMONE WEIL AND THE NEED FOR OBEDIENCE:  
POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND ETHICAL DIMENSIONS**

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**Abstract**

*This essay explores the development of Simone Weil's conception of obedience across religious, political, and ethical contexts. By bringing together these strands of Weil's thought, it aims to illuminate some important connections in her treatment of obedience throughout these diverse topics. The author argues that Weil's political treatment of obedience is deeply influenced by ideas in Christian thought, and that this account is situated within an understanding of obedience in the natural world which is itself ethically loaded. Hence it is suggested that Weil's account of obedience has something to offer philosophy today: namely, a conception of obedience which recognises the practical and ethical need for obeying others, but which is distinct from the mere submission to power.*

**Keywords:** Simone Weil, obedience, freedom, Christian ethics, political philosophy

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**Introduction**

Obedience plays a central role in Simone Weil's philosophy, both in her political and religious writings. In her early political writings, she grapples with the question of how and why people willingly "remain submissive to [authority] to the point of dying at [their] orders" (Weil 2001, 133). In *The Need for Roots*, she defines obedience as something that "presupposes consent" (Weil 2002, 13) and discusses questions such as what obligation we have to obey the state (Weil 2002, 174). In her religious writings, obedience to God and to necessity is a significant and recurring theme (Weil 1951, 47; 56-57; 81; 128-132; 194). She also applies this vocabulary of obedience to non-sentient objects, describing the sea's beauty as "perfect obedience", for example (Weil 1951, 87).

In this essay I explore how Weil's conception of obedience is developed across these political, ethical, and religious contexts. I hope to highlight some important points of connection in Weil's treatment of obedience through these different topics. In particular, I suggest that Weil's political conception of

obedience is deeply ingrained in a Christian theological tradition which takes obedience to be a virtue. I also look at how Weil's understanding of obedience as an ethical concept is situated within a broader metaphysical picture, where matter is obedient to order and limit. I argue that this metaphysical picture is, for Weil, morally and politically loaded. I argue that an important ethical strand can be seen to underpin Weil's conception of obedience across these contexts: the concept of obedience is used to push back against a misconception about power and limit in both the human and the natural world.

Recent Weil scholarship has explored the role of obedience in Weil's religious philosophy, particularly in relation to topics such as grace, attention, necessity, and sacrifice (Heinrich-Ramharter & Heinrich 2022; McCullough 2014; Rozelle-Stone & Stone 2013). In political philosophy, some scholars have discussed how Weil's conception of obedience relates to concerns about state authority and political resistance (Blum and Seidler 2009; McLennan 1990)<sup>1</sup>.

However, these discussions generally focus separately on either the development of Weil's politics of obedience, or her religious writings about obedience to God, rather than offering a systematic account of how Weil's conception of obedience is developed across these contexts together. A notable exception to this is Julie Daigle's recent work on obedience, freedom, and decreation in Weil's work (2020). Daigle's thesis looks at Weil's approach to obedience both from the perspective of her politics of social oppression and duties to the state, and integrates this with an analysis of Weil's conception of supernatural obedience and the role this plays in Weil's religious ethics (Daigle 2020).

In this essay, I offer a reading of Weil's philosophy of obedience which emphasises the continuity of Weil's approach to obedience throughout her political, ethical, and religious thought. However, my focus here differs from Daigle's in that I look specifically to Weil's engagement with Christian theology (particularly the monastic tradition) to illuminate some of the ways that these diverse aspects of Weil's thought mutually enrich each other. I argue that Weil's distinct

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<sup>1</sup> These contemporary discussions are preceded by some early Weil scholarship which opened up these discussions about Weil's conception of obedience. In particular, Dreyfus writes about how Weil's religious metaphysics of obedience (to God), fits in with her ethics of negation and decreation (Dreyfus 1951). Fraisse also offers an analysis of Weil's approach to obedience which recognises a tension between Weil's politics of revolt and resistance with her Stoic understanding of obedience as an acceptance of necessity (Fraisse 1975).

approach to the ethics and philosophy of obedience can be understood as an attempt to bring elements of this religious approach to obedience to bear on political topics, such as the legitimacy of the laws of the state and our understanding of force.

## **1. Two approaches to obedience**

In order to get to grips with how Weil develops her own conception of obedience, I want to look at how the concept has been treated in some broader traditions which Weil's approach draws on. In particular, I want to suggest that Weil's approach to the topic is influenced by two distinct ways of thinking about obedience: firstly, as a political concept in the context of 20th-Century Europe, and secondly in the context of the Christian tradition which sees obedience as a special kind of virtue. My hope is that looking at these two strands of obedience will help us to situate Weil's interest in obedience in the practical and intellectual context out of which it emerged, as well as helping us get to grips with exactly what motivates her distinct approach to obedience.

### 1.1. Obedience in 20<sup>th</sup> century politics

The political context in which Weil is writing throws up various problems and dangers that obedience can lead to. Donald Mackinnon, (writing in the 1960s after Weil's lifetime), expresses this worry well:

The way of near-absolute obedience is the way that helps make possible the Belsens, the Dachaus and the Auschwitz's of the twentieth century ... No virtue is surely more questionable than obedience. (Mackinnon 1974, 105)

There are clearly cases where obedience, especially uncritical obedience to authority, can be used as a tool for oppression. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century shows us many examples of atrocities and war crimes which were enabled, at least in part, by ordinary people following orders. The notion that my duty is only to obey orders, rather than to do what I myself deem lawful or moral, easily gives rise to the so-called Nuremburg defence: that 'I was just following orders' and ought not to be held fully responsible for my actions. In cases like these, grave crimes can be committed, not because those involved were doing something that they judged

themselves to be appropriate or morally permissible, but because someone of higher rank told them to.

Simone Weil is very aware of these kinds of problems that can arise from obedience to authority and orders. This can be seen in some of her early political writings, where she attempts to analyse how these dynamics of obedience and oppression work. Weil identifies the issue of deflected responsibility through obedience as far back as the ancient Romans, describing how "for the slaves of Rome a particular morality was applicable, whereby a slave could do no wrong if acting in obedience to his master's orders or in his interests" (Weil 2001, 172-3). She points to this as the reason that slave rebellions were rare in Rome: since this attitude was inculcated not only by the owners of slaves, but was also "largely adopted by the slaves" themselves (Weil 2001, 173). In this way, slaves were discouraged from disobedience or rebellion because they have also internalised the belief that their duty is simply to obey, regardless of whether their orders are moral or just.

In *Meditation on Obedience and Liberty*<sup>2</sup>, Weil describes how almost every form of social organisation fundamentally involves the submission of the greater number to the smaller (Weil 2001, 132). For instance, many soldiers obey the orders of a few generals, and many labourers obey the instructions of a few managers. For Weil, this shows us that number does not constitute power<sup>3</sup> when it comes to social mechanisms. If it did, we would expect the masses of people under submission to be more powerful than the few superiors they obey, and for them to refuse to obey when they are asked to do things that cause them suffering. Cases like that of the Roman slaves show that this does not always happen: people will obey the orders of a few superiors even in cases where it leads to suffering, or even death<sup>4</sup>. Weil says that because the many who obey here are a number, they become less powerful: they become a "herd of the majority" (Weil 2001, 135). Those under submission in a social organisation are merely "one plus one plus one, and so on" (Weil 2001, 135), whilst the few superiors that they obey can form a cooperating "whole".

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<sup>2</sup> This is a fragmentary essay written in 1937 (Blum & Seidler 2009, 41). The original French essay can be found in Weil 1991, 128-133.

<sup>3</sup> She uses the word "une force" to describe this (Weil 2013, 130), usually translated as 'force' or 'might'. I discuss this concept in more detail here on page 23.

<sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of this example, see Blum & Seidler 2009, 132-133.

In cases like these, obedience is characterised by acting according to the demands and wishes of a superior, regardless of what the one obeying wants or needs. Obedience is synonymous with submission and servility. It is to be contrasted with free action, because when you obey you put your own reasons, values, and beliefs on hold for the sake of someone else's. Total obedience might look like the kind of obedience found in cases of slavery: where your will is given up to that of your superiors to the point that you do not even have responsibility for your own actions. On this picture, obedience seems like a very dangerous component of social structures.

### 1.2. Obedience in Christianity

However, this is not the only picture of obedience available to us. In the history of Christianity, obedience has often been understood as a special kind of moral or religious virtue, where obedience to one's superiors mediates one's obedience to God. For example, Aquinas argues that obedience is a special virtue whereby "obedience to a superior is due in accordance with the divinely established order of things" (Aquinas 1920, II.II.104 art 2) On this view, rational wills are regulated by the will of God, and some human wills approach this divine will more than others: so "the *will* of the one *man* who issues a command may be as a second rule to the *will* of this other *man* who obeys him" (Aquinas, 1920 II.II.104 art 1). This Christian conception is often associated, not so much with blindly following orders, as with education<sup>5</sup>. The Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe describes how this theological understanding of obedience is not about relinquishing one's will to that of another, but is instead aligned with learning and cooperating:

You must have heard a thousand times that obedire comes from ob-audire, to listen. Even the English phrase, 'doing what you are told' conveys, if you think of it, the same notion. To obey is first of all to learn something, to share in another's practical wisdom, (Prudentia or Providence) ... Obedience is first of all an act of learning, though not learning an abstract or

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<sup>5</sup> I say 'this' and not 'the' Christian conception here because there is not one homogenous account of obedience in Christianity: some Christian thinkers offer accounts of obedience very different to the picture offered here. My point here is not that all Christians share the view I describe, but that there is one prominent strand of Christian thought which understands obedience in this way.

speculative truth, as when you learn biology or physics, but learning a practical truth, what is to be done, learning how to live. (McCabe 1984, 282)

This conception of obedience contrasts with the one we saw earlier because it does not typically involve relinquishing one's own responsibility and reasoning for the sake of someone else's. Instead, obedience to another person is seen as a way of developing and fostering one's practical wisdom and reason. There is no suggestion here that obedience could be used as cop-out for doing the wrong thing – the person obeying here is still taking an active "share" in the practical reason that goes into the obedient act. The act of the one obeying is still, in some sense, her own – even if she is acting according to the will of someone else. The act of obeying here is not defined by absence (of responsibility, of choice, of freedom), but by something positive: actively listening and wilfully doing as one is told<sup>6</sup>.

Whilst this Christian conception of obedience does still involve conforming to the demands of a superior<sup>7</sup>, the truly obedient person is not here exemplified by the slave or factory worker who unthinkingly obeys regardless of their conscience and beliefs. The ideal is instead exemplified by something like a student or a novice in a monastery, who puts aside their own desires, intuitions, and temptations in order to be taught to think differently.<sup>8</sup>

This view of obedience also suggests to us a different way of thinking about the relationship between obedience and freedom. Whilst the earlier picture takes obedience to be a restraint on one's freedom because it limits your ability to make your own decisions, this Christian conception sees obedience as something which fosters one's ability to make prudent decisions. In this tradition, it is disobedience

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<sup>6</sup> Daigle also points out the significance this etymology for thinking about Weil's philosophy. She links the concept of listening to Weil's other perceptual metaphors – particularly of 'turning one's gaze' (Daigle 2020, 105).

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas describes this as a causal relationship: "he who obeys is moved by the command of the *person* he obeys, just as *natural* things are moved by their motive *causes*." (Aquinas, 1920 II.II.104 art 4).

<sup>8</sup> McCabe takes this a step further, describing how, in Christianity "obedience is not the suppression of our will in favour of someone else's, it is learning to live in community, in solidarity" (McCabe 1985, 285). But this is a false dichotomy: obedience can essentially involve learning to live with others whilst also requiring a suppression of the will. Moreover, Aquinas himself characterises obedience as "the *virtue* [...] whereby we contemn our own will for *God's* sake" (Aquinas 1920, II.II.104 art 3)

which is often associated with a lack of freedom. The monastic rule of St Benedict<sup>9</sup> for example, describes how some types of wandering monk (called Girovagi) do not obey any fixed laws or structured of authority, and are left "slaves to their own pleasures and the snares of gluttony" (St Benedict 1931, Ch. 1). Those who enter a monastery under willing obedience to an abbot and their community have a way of escaping these snares: by "not guiding themselves in life by their own judgment", monks can "obey not their own desires and wishes, but walking by the judgment and commands of another pass their life in community" (St Benedict 1931, Ch. 1). There is a sense here in which the monks are actually more free because of their obedience: by following the rules or instruction of someone other than themselves, monks are able to free themselves from temptations which hold them captive.

This theological background also seems to have an influence on Weil's thought. In her letters to Father Perrin (published in *Waiting on God*), obedience is discussed in connection with truth, vocation, and educational or intellectual pursuits (Weil 1951, 69; 131; 194). Springsted describes how, for Weil, "willing obedience to the universe, not only teaches us how to pay attention to God ... it also teaches us how to pay attention to the needs of our neighbors. It is by doing so that a moral community may be formed." (Springsted 2021, 204), echoing McCabe's point that obedience is about education and learning practical truth. In *The Need for Roots*, Weil identifies obedience as something essential to a person's ethical development, ("a necessary food for the human soul"), not just something politically and practically necessary (Weil 2002, 13).<sup>10</sup> She says that this obedience is deprived of us when we are kept in subjection by force or cruelty (Weil 2002, 13). Later on, she uses the example of Benedictine monasteries to illustrate this conception of obedience (Weil 2002, 267). Her discussion of the need for obedience immediately follows her discussion on the need for liberty<sup>11</sup> (Weil 2002, 13). She describes how

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<sup>9</sup> St Benedict of Nursia was a monk born in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century who is sometimes described as "the father of Western monasticism" (Ford 1907). His rule is a document which sets out instructions for how monasteries should function – see Alston 1907.

<sup>10</sup> Winch takes this conception of obedience in Weil's later political writings as a departure from Weil's worries about obedience expressed in her earlier work. He describes how, in Weil's later political thought "Obedience to the authority of other men is no longer seen as a social evil, however, unavoidable. ... the problem of minimising oppression is now treated not as one of eliminating, as far as possible, subordination to authority" (Winch 1978, 20).

<sup>11</sup> The subheadings for each 'need of the soul' in some editions of *The Need for Roots* do not exist in Weil's own drafts of the essay. In a manuscript on 'Expose des Obligations',

the enforcement of sensible and comprehensible rules is compatible with complete "liberty of conscience", because even if some possibilities for action are prohibited (e.g. stealing), one who has sufficiently internalised these rules will not feel these restrictions as true limitations (Weil 2002, 12)<sup>12</sup>. So, like the Christian picture we saw above, Weil also wants us to recognise obedience as something that we need for our own sakes, which is distinct from mere subjection to power, connected with learning and the cultivation of the right sort of values, and which is not antithetical to liberty or freedom.

## 2. Obedience and consent

It seems then that the challenge for Weil is how this vital need for obedience (both for the soul and practical society at large) can be reconciled with the dangers of obedience as a tool for oppression. The answer, I suggest, is the development of a new conception of obedience, one which attempts both to recognise the need for structures of obedience to authority and to laws, but which is distinct from mere submission and subjection. This conception, I suggest, attempts to reconcile elements of this older theological picture with an understanding of the modern political problems that Weil is writing in. Although she takes influence from the Christian picture, her conception is also used in the context of reforming society from a political perspective. I will here focus on two important ideas developed in *The Need for Roots*: i) that true obedience presupposes consent from the one obeying, and ii) that obedience cannot compel one to act in a way that one's conscience prohibits.

### 2.1. Obedience presupposes consent

Near the beginning of *The Need for Roots*, Weil offers a definition of obedience as one of the needs of the soul:

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she explicitly pairs obedience and liberty, describing them together in one paragraph (Weil, 2013 102)

<sup>12</sup> This idea that obedience can increase our liberty by freeing us from appetite may also take influence from Rousseau. He describes in *The Social Contract* how "the impulsion of mere appetite is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom" (Rousseau 2018, 1.8.3). Doering discusses in more detail the influence of Rousseau on the development of Weil's political thought (Doering 1992).



Obedience is a vital need of the human soul. It is of two kinds: obedience to established rules and obedience to human beings looked upon as leaders. It presupposes consent, not in regard to every single order received, but the kind of consent that is given once and for all, with the sole reservation, in case of need, that the demands of conscience be satisfied. It requires to be generally recognized, and above all by leaders themselves, that consent and not fear of punishment or hope of reward constitutes, in fact, the mainspring of obedience, so that submission may never be mistaken for servility. (Weil 2002, 13)

The first point, Weil makes here is that obedience requires the consent of the one who is obeying. At first glance this may seem like an unintuitive definition: isn't someone who follows orders because they are forced to still obeying those orders? This is perhaps especially perplexing given that elsewhere Weil describes cases of obedience where consent is not obviously given: for instance, in her letters to Father Perrin she describes how "matter is entirely passive and in consequence entirely obedient to God's will" (Weil 1951, 128). In *Are we Struggling for Justice*, she also refers to the "distinction ... between obedience which is consented to and obedience which is not" (Weil 1987, 6). This suggests that there are at least some cases of obedience where consent to the thing being obeyed is not present.

Weil's other remarks in *Are We Struggling for Justice* can help clarify exactly what sort of claim Weil is making when she says that obedience presupposes consent. In this essay, she describes how "oppression ... is a terrible caricature of obedience. Consent is essential to obedience as it is to love" (Weil 1987, 2). Weil does not deny that sometimes we describe an action as obeying or obedient when there is no consent (and it seems like we do sometimes use the word in this way). Rather, her point is a normative one: true obedience presupposes consent, and obedience without this is a kind of perverted, false form of obedience. Weil describes consent as the "mainspring"<sup>13</sup> of obedience, not threat of punishment or hope of reward (Weil 2002, 13). In its literal sense, the mainspring of a mechanism is the central component which causes the other parts of the mechanism to move – it also stores the energy of the mechanism. We might imagine obedience without consent as a kind of watch with a broken (or no) mainspring: it will not function in the right way; it will need an external source of energy for the parts to move.

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<sup>13</sup> This is translated from the French phrase "le ressort principal" (Weil, 2013 120) which also has the double-meaning we find in the English 'mainspring'.

So, why should we think that consent ought to have this central place in Weil's normative conception of obedience? One way of thinking about this is perhaps to think about how one would answer the question 'what are you really obeying?', (or, continuing with the mainspring analogy, 'what is the source of your obedience?'). If I follow someone's orders because if I do not do as they say they will starve me, in one clear sense I am obeying their instructions. On the other hand, I could be said to be obeying them only as an intermediary – what I am *really* following is my need for food and my desire to survive. If the threat of starvation were removed (e.g., if I stopped being threatened, or if I decided I no longer wanted food to survive), I would stop following orders. In this way, my need for food and survival, not the person who I am supposedly obedient to, is the real source which creates and sustains my actions.

A result of Weil's definition of obedience as something which requires consent to the leader or rules you are obedient to is that we can make a distinction between acting out of obedience and following orders because you are forced to. Cases of following orders where one has no real choice to disobey are, on this view, not really cases of obedience at all. This conception of obedience is used by Weil in an explicitly political context: she uses it to address questions like how the structure of authority should work, and whether we have an obligation to follow the law (Weil 2002, 13-14; 174). But the conception also resonates with aspects of the Christian picture of obedience we saw earlier: the act of obeying actively involves the choice and intellect of the one obeying – because you have to decide yourself if you are willing to consent to the leader or rules in question.

Weil describes how this consent to obedience is needed "not to each order but once and for all" (Weil 2002, 13). I understand this to mean that the consent which is presupposed by obedience is a kind which is given to a set of rules or authority overall, not to every individual rule or order imposed by those rules or authority. This matters if we think that obedience should sometimes involve doing things that you don't agree with or wouldn't choose to do yourself. By consenting to a source of obedience "once and for all" we can agree to act according to some rules or instructions in all cases where those rules or authority applies, rather than judging for ourselves whether we should consent to a given order or application of a law in each individual case.

This aspect of obedience is integral to the political and Christian conceptions of obedience we saw earlier. In the political sphere, we sometimes have to obey orders for the sake of the public good and cooperation even if we think some of those orders are sub-optimal. In other cases, (e.g., military orders, or when I'm given instructions from my boss), I may have to obey orders simply because it is not my place to make decisions about how something should be done. In the Christian picture, a large part of the value of obedience comes from following rules given to me by someone else instead of acting according to my own desires or judgments.

If obedience required me to individually consent to each order I follow, such that I could pick and choose whatever orders or laws I want to obey, this would lose something fundamental about what obedience is for. I would not really be deferring my judgement to someone else – I would still be making all my own decisions every step of the way. Laws or leaders here start to look less like sources of authority, and just like guidelines or suggestions.

Obedience needs to involve following some instructions or rules irrespective of whether or not you like them. For instance, I might consent to following traffic laws in my country because I trust that those laws should be followed by everyone for the sake of public safety ("once and for all") – even if I think some of those laws can be excessive or silly, or even if some of those laws lead to unnecessary inconveniences. By contrast, if I were to consent, not to traffic laws in general, but to every single individual traffic law, or every application of those laws, I would be free to disregard the laws I disagreed with and only obey the ones I thought were warranted. This latter kind of obedience is not obeying traffic law at all – it's just doing what I choose to do, which sometimes happens to coincide with those laws. Clearly this latter notion of obedience is not going to be very helpful for making traffic safe and functional. Consenting to obedience is thus not just about agreeing to do something that a rule or leader says you should do – it's about placing your trust and consent in that set of rules or leader so that you follow their instruction whether or not you personally agree with it.

Thus, Weil's conception of obedience as something which requires consent once and for all offers us a way of thinking about obedience which is distinct from mere submission to power or force, but nonetheless retains the deferral to rules or authority found in both the political and religious conceptions. Obedience

requires active consent and cannot be forced against a person's will, but it does still involve putting aside your own will and judgement in favour of someone else's.

## 2.2. The demands of conscience

Now that we have looked at what exactly Weil means when she says that obedience presupposes consent, I now want to turn to a qualification she makes about this: she says that this consent is to be given "with the sole reservation, in case of need, that the demands of conscience be satisfied" (Weil 2002, 13). I take this to mean that, although consent to obedience is given once and for all, this consent does not extend beyond the limits of the demands of conscience. This is important because, as I will explore in this section, the demands of conscience may require us to disobey or refuse certain orders.

In her initial definition of the need for obedience, Weil does not offer us much detail about why this reservation about the demands of conscience is made. However, we can look to two further sections later on in *The Need for Roots* in which she describes examples of disobeying orders on the grounds of conscience to further understand this. Firstly, she has a discussion where she outlines the limits of our duty to obey the laws of the state, and secondly she gives a literary example about some judges who disobey the orders of their king in *La Estrella de Sevilla*.

Weil describes how "obedience [to the state] is obligatory, not because of any particular right to issue commands possessed by the state, but because obedience is essential for the country's preservation and tranquillity" (Weil 2002, 174). For Weil, this obligation exists even if the laws of the state are "mediocre" (Weil 2002, 174)<sup>14</sup>. However strong this obligation is for Weil, though, it is not unconditional:

It is certainly not an unlimited obligation, but its only valid limit is a revolt on the part of conscience. No criterion can be offered indicating exactly what this limit is; it is even impossible for each of us to prescribe one for himself once and for all: when you feel you can't obey any longer, you just have to disobey. (Weil 2002, 174-5)

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<sup>14</sup> The word 'mediocre' is interesting here: it suggests we have an obligation to obey laws that may be inefficient, perhaps inconvenient, but it does not immediately suggest something unjust or immoral.

Here Weil describes the "limit" of our obligation to obey the laws of the state as "a revolt on the part of conscience". Already we can see here a contrast with some of more problematic accounts of obedience she looks at in the political sphere: in the case of Roman slavery, for example, the duty of obedience is taken to be unconditional and without limit, according to Weil (Weil 2001, 172-3). Instead, Weil identifies a valid limit even for something that she thinks we usually have a strong obligation to obey (the state)<sup>15</sup>.

The limit, however, is not clearly defined. Weil explicitly does not offer us a prescriptive set of principles or conditions for when this limit should be reached. This is perhaps partly because conscience is a personal, intentional concept – the limit of conscience might depend on a person's own values or circumstances, for example. However, this does not seem to be the only thing going on here: Weil says that it is "impossible" for us to prescribe such principles for ourselves as well (Weil 2002, 174). Her claim that no criterion can be offered for this limit, then, seems to be a stronger objection to the very idea of prescribing a general criterion for a revolt on the part of the conscience, even if such criterion were restricted to one's own actions.

It's significant that disobeying here is not framed by Weil as a kind of choice, but as a kind of necessity: it's about when you feel you "can't" obey any longer and so you "have to" disobey (Weil, 2002, 175). She uses the language of ability and necessity here which suggests something stronger than simply thinking you shouldn't obey someone any longer and then choosing not to. Instead, it is described as feeling *unable* to obey: your conscience cannot allow you to obey, and so disobedience becomes the only option available to you<sup>16</sup>.

Weil goes on to identify one necessary condition for reaching this limit of conscience which makes it possible "to disobey without it being a crime" (Weil 2002, 175): that is that the disobedient action "is to be urged forward by so

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<sup>15</sup> It's worth mentioning here that Weil herself worked with The Resistance in the 1940s distributing leaflets (Springsted 2021, xx) and wanted to be involved actively fighting in the resistance (Yourgrau 2011, 89).

<sup>16</sup> This description of actions which are made, in some sense, through our free decisions, but in another sense are made because we feel we could not have done otherwise, echoes something Weil describes in *Waiting on God*. Here she talks of actions which are "without being under the empire of the will ... and yet not entirely independent of us" (Weil, 1951 34). She says it is in this domain that we "experience the compulsion of God's pressure" (Weil, 1951 44). Further exploration of this connection, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

imperious an obligation that one is constrained to scorn all risks" (Weil 2002, 175). The revolt on the part of conscience is not something that should be appeased by the fear of personal consequences one would incur from disobeying. As I've understood Weil's account of conscience here, it would be incompatible with the kind of moral compulsion Weil associates with the limits of conscience to decide against disobeying because of fear of the repercussions. Deciding against disobedience should not be an option at all: your conscience should make you feel unable to do this. This perhaps helps us to understand why Weil thinks that no criterion can be offered for describing the limits of conscience: this limit is not defined by, for example, some general set of moral principles or obligations. Instead, it occurs when we are faced with a kind of moral or psychological impossibility: being asked to obey an order or person that we cannot, in good conscience, follow.

As I have understood it, this is a qualification about the limits of practical action: I cannot consent to obey an authority in cases where I am unable to obey. Because Weil's conception of obedience requires the active consent of the one obeying, this limit of conscience is a real limit: if I cannot obey without being forced to go against my conscience, I simply cannot obey.

Weil later discusses a literary example of disobeying orders given by an authority. This is from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish play *La Estrella de Sevilla*<sup>17</sup>:

[...] the king wishes to prevent an assassin from being condemned to death, because the murder had been secretly ordered by himself. He sends for each of the three judges separately to inform him personally of his royal will. Each of them, on bended knee, assures the king of his absolute allegiance<sup>18</sup>. After which having come together again as a tribunal, they pass the death sentence unanimously. When the king demands an explanation of their conduct, they reply: 'As subjects we accept your authority in all things; but as judges we only obey our conscience.' (Weil 2002, 266-267)

This is a striking example because, despite doing something which directly contradicts the King's orders, the judges still claim to accept the King's absolute authority. They do not see their refusal of his orders to be a compromise of their total allegiance to him. They appeal to a distinction between obeying "as subjects"

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<sup>17</sup> Weil attributes this play to Lope de Vega (Weil, 2002 266), but the authorship of this work has been disputed (De Armas, 1996)

<sup>18</sup> The phrase "absolute allegiance" is translated from "soumission totale" (Weil, 2013 336)

and "as judges", suggesting that the total authority of the King does not extend to overriding their legal judgements, in which they are compelled to obey their consciences. This refusal of the King's orders, Weil says, is done without "without the slightest regard either for power or possibilities of prosperity or adversity, reward or punishment." (Weil 2002, 267). Despite the judges going against the King's direct orders, Weil describes this as a conception of total and unconditional allegiance<sup>19</sup>(Weil 2002, 266).

How, then, can this idea of allegiance be considered unconditional when this example seems precisely to illustrate the judges making an exception to their duty to obey the King's orders? At first glance, their remark can be seen as a way of recognising the limits and conditions of the King's authority: which does not extend to overriding the conscience of the judges.

I want to suggest that the answer is found in Weil's remark that, though this allegiance is unconditional, it is allegiance paid solely to legitimate authority<sup>20</sup> (Weil, 2002, 267).

Daigle analyzes how this notion of absolute allegiance is paid not merely to the King, but to the justice that the king embodies – Weil is thus basing this account of legitimate authority on justice itself, rather than the inherent power or force of the person who is King (Daigle 2020, 159). This notion of legitimacy introduces a normative element to the King's rule and the obedience due to him: although he is an absolute ruler, the area of his authority is determined and given in accordance with further norms and conventions of legitimacy.

Weil describes the conception of absolute allegiance at work here as "precisely the same conception as that of obedience to the superior in the monastic orders" (Weil 2002, 267). She describes how:

A king obeyed in this fashion really was a representative of God in the eyes of his subjects, like the superior of a monastery in the eyes of his monks; not through any illusion which would have made him appear divine, but solely as the result of a convention which was considered to be divinely ordained. It was a religious respect absolutely free from all idolatry. .... The whole of public life was thus permeated by the religious virtue of

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<sup>19</sup> Translated from "Soumission inconditionnée totale" (Weil, 2013 337)

<sup>20</sup> Weil describes this obedience as due solely to "à la légitimité" (Weil 2013, 337). In the English version, this is translated to "hereditary authority". The word in French, however, also denotes a kind of legitimacy or validity which does not come across in the English phrase.

obedience, like the life of a Benedictine monastery of the best period. (Weil 2002, 267)

In a monastic setting, the abbot, (the superior), is obeyed by the monks as Christ (St Benedict 1931, Ch.2; Peifer 2013). However, the abbot is not seen here as any sort of divine entity, or even as someone with some special access to God's will over any of the monks. Rather, the abbot is obeyed a symbolic stand in for Christ: by obeying the abbot, the monks are able to imitate the relationship of the disciples to Christ<sup>21</sup>. In this way, the abbot plays the role of an intermediary: by teaching the monks to cultivate obedience, he can teach them to develop and listen to their own relationship with Christ (Foster 2021, 37).

Weil describes this conception of allegiance as "absolutely free from all idolatry" (Weil 2002, 267). Because the abbot or monarch under this conception is merely considered a "representative of God" (Weil 2002, 267), (and not, for instance an incarnation of God), it is not the case that whatever they say must always be just or right. Their actions and orders are given within a further structure of conventions and beliefs which that abbot or monarch is beholden to<sup>22</sup>. There is a relationship between the person and the ideal or ideals that they stand for which can be brought under scrutiny and questioned if the situation demands it. This means that there is epistemic space for recognising that we cannot, in good conscience, obey an order that the abbot or king demands (as the judges in the *Estrella de Sevilla* story do). This refusal to obey is not a rejection of the absolute authority of the monarch or abbot, but a way of respecting that authority within the structures and conventions in which make it legitimate. Weil's conception of obedience as something which requires consent once and for all thus does not mean that once we have consented to a leader, we have to do whatever they demand regardless of its legitimacy or fairness.

### 3. Obedience beyond the human

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<sup>21</sup> St Benedict describes how "an abbot ought not to teach, establish, or order anything contrary to the spirit of the Lord's revealed will, but let his commandments and teaching, as being the leaven of divine justice, sprinkle the minds of the disciples" (St Benedict, 1931 Ch.2)

<sup>22</sup> This notion echoes a point made in Weil's initial discussion of the need for obedience: that when a person is put at the head of a social organism for life, they ought to be "a symbol and not a ruler" (Weil, 2002 13).



Having outlined some elements of Weil's political and ethical conception of obedience, I now want to look at Weil's approach to obedience in the natural and physical world. As well as describing obedience in human social structures, Weil applies the vocabulary of obedience to non-sentient objects, describing the sea's beauty as "perfect obedience", for example (Weil 1951, 87). She also describes how everything in the world, including human beings, is inescapably obedient to God in everything it does (Weil 1951, 128-129; Weil 2002, 279). These claims seem in tension with the idea that obedience requires consent to rules or leaders: it's not clear what it would even mean to say that material non-thinking objects "consent" to something, and Weil wants to maintain that, in some way, we are obedient to God even if we do not consent to this (Weil 1951, 129)<sup>23</sup>.

At first glance, this may seem irrelevant to questions about political and social disobedience. We might think that Weil is simply equivocating when she talks about obedience in these two different domains, for example. When describing this obedience of matter, Weil tends to emphasise its connection to necessity rather than to consent – this kind of obedience is about obeying mechanical laws regardless of choice, rather than consenting to obey a leader or rules when one has the option not to. Whilst I have emphasised that Weil's conception of obedience in the ethical domain involves active consent and freedom, the obedience of matter is described as completely "passive" (Weil 2002, 279).

It does seem that we can accept aspects of Weil's ethical conception of obedience even if we do not take on board her whole metaphysical or theological picture. Nonetheless I think we also have good reason to think that, for Weil, these two senses of obedience are connected. For one thing, Weil often moves from talking about obedience in an ethical domain to the metaphysical in the same work, without saying herself that she is equivocating. In *The Need for Roots*, she moves from looking at examples like those we've looked at in this essay (e.g. obedience to a state, monastic conceptions of obedience and allegiance), to talking about the sovereignty of obedience in nature near the end of the essay (Weil 2002, 279). She also describes how "the ancients ... believed that matter was

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<sup>23</sup> These contrasting ways of understanding obedience in Weil's thought point to an interesting aspect of Weil's philosophical methodology: her deliberate use of contradictions. Fraise interprets these apparent contradictions in Weil's approach to obedience as intentional; part of Weil's broader approach to see true contradictions as a mark of reality, rather than something to be resolved in the name of consistency or simplicity (Fraise 1975, 288).

obedient to eternal wisdom by virtue of the love which causes it to consent to this obedience" (Weil 2002, 282), suggesting that her metaphysics of obedience is not intended as a complete departure from her conception of obedience as consensual.

In *The Need for Roots*, Weil gives an explanation which will help clarify what she means in saying both that obedience presupposes consent, but that we cannot choose to disobey God. She describes how:

Those men who disregard the true good disobey God in the sense that they don't obey him as a thinking creature ought to do, with the consent of the mind. But their bodies and souls are entirely subject to the laws of the mechanisms which rule in sovereign fashion over physical and psychological matter. The physical and psychological matter in them obeys perfectly; they are perfectly obedient in so far as they are matter" (Weil 2002, 283)

On one hand, humans are inherently intellectual creatures, and we have the ability to consent or not consent to God with our mind. However, it's important for Weil that we are, at the same time, fundamentally material and subject to causal forces which affect us. This latter kind of obedience does not require the consent of the mind because it does not involve our obedience as thinking creatures, but just as objects in the world.

Now I want to think about exactly what Weil means by describing this kind of necessity in the material world as "obedience". In particular I want to suggest that the language of obedience in this metaphysical context is continuous with her account of obedience in the political sphere in that both accounts want to use a notion of obedience to push against a conception of social and physical mechanisms as driven by power and force.

To get to grips with what Weil means by saying that matter is obedient, we can look at the alternative picture she is reacting against. Weil's idea that everything in the world is obedient is contrasted with a picture where blind force is dominant. She is clear early on that this picture is politically and ethically loaded, describing how "the great instigators of violence have encouraged themselves with the thought of how blind, mechanical force is sovereign throughout the whole universe" (Weil 2002, 10).

The word 'force' here is translated from the French 'la force'. It has been pointed out that this is not a perfect translation of the French; David Levy describes how "while the two words overlap in meanings, they are not synonyms. In French, 'la force' has a connotation of strength and could readily be translated as 'might'" (Levy 2020, 21). However, Weil also develops this concept by explicitly

drawing on the scientific and mechanical sense of the term which does accord with the English word 'force'. She describes how this notion of force as supreme over all phenomena has dominated the natural sciences for the past two or three centuries, and says that it has its roots in Descartes (Weil 2002, 235) – elsewhere she explicitly attributes the modern conception of force to Galileo (Weil 2001, 133).

We should keep in mind both this mechanical sense of force, as well as the connotations of might and strength, while reading these passages from Weil. Force is associated with 'being forced' – moving someone to do something regardless of their will and choice. In the mechanical sense, force determines the motion and direction of an object. An object under force continues in that direction until it meets a resisting force. When two opposing forces try to act on the same object, the object is moved in the direction of the stronger.

Weil is clear that we cannot simply accept this picture of the natural world where force is the supreme principle over everything in nature, and then also expect human affairs to exempt themselves from this and instead order themselves by justice or reason. Since we are ourselves a part of the natural world, this is "a flagrant absurdity" (Weil 2002, 235). So it matters for Weil that we recognise the problem with this picture of nature. She highlights this problem with a quote from Hitler:

We perceive it even through the very words in which Hitler affirms the contrary fallacy: '... in a world in which planets and suns follow circular trajectories, moons revolve round planets, and force reigns everywhere and supreme over weakness, which it either compels to serve it docilely or else crushes out of existence...'. How should blind force be able to produce circles? It is not weakness which is the docile servant of force. It is force which is docile to eternal Wisdom. (Weil 2002, 279-280)

Force, on the view that Weil is criticising, produces a movement which is one-directional and unlimited: namely the domination of the greater force over the weak. Force is one-directional because the greater force always "reigns supreme" (Weil 2002, 280) – there is nothing to stop or alter the course of the greater force, and weakness is only crushed or made docile, never altering or stopping the movement of the greater force. Force is unlimited because the greater force always wins out unless there is a still greater force to overcome it: force has no end or destruction, but continues indefinitely.

But the movement of the planets and suns does not have this one-directional or limitless character: they follow circular trajectories that have a form and an order, which does not look like an ever-continuing movement in the direction of the greater force. For Weil, recognising this fact leads us to recognise that blind force does not reign supreme over all matter<sup>24</sup>. A force on its own is shapeless: it is one-dimensional, going onwards in the direction of the greater force. It does not have limits which create a determinate form and shape. If this were the case we would expect there be no weak forces that persist in the universe; they would all be defeated or made 'docile'. Objects would move ever onwards in the direction of force.

But they don't. Instead, there is a balance or equilibrium of forces, resulting in things like the gravitational orbits of the planets around the sun. Objects and forces go in circles of a limited size and shape. For Weil, this indicates that something else is sovereign in the universe, which is limit:

"Brute force is not sovereign in this world. It is by nature blind and indeterminate. What is sovereign in this world is determinateness, limit. Eternal Wisdom imprisons this universe in a network, a web of determinations. The universe accepts passively. The brute force of matter, which appears to us sovereign, is nothing else in reality but perfect obedience." (Weil 2002, 279)

Matter does not ultimately pursue the movement of the greater forces, but follows the natural order of determinations in the universe, in which everything (even the greatest force) is subject to a finite limit. This determinateness (or Eternal Wisdom<sup>25</sup>) is sometimes referred to by Weil as "providence" (Weil 2002, 279) – not in the sense of divine interference with the natural world, but as the order of the world itself. It's this providence that is ultimately sovereign over force. She links this to a concept of balance<sup>26</sup> which is synonymous with justice (Weil 2002, 280).

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<sup>24</sup> Daigle argues that this argument that obedience, and not brute force, is sovereign in the world, is influenced by Weil's reading of the Stoics (see Daigle 2020, 159-160).

<sup>25</sup> She gives some context to why this is called should be called 'eternal wisdom' and its connection to thought and knowledge in an earlier passage – describing how "the object of human thought is itself thought. The savant's true aim is the union of his own mind with the mysterious wisdom eternally inscribed in the universe" (Weil 2002, 256).

<sup>26</sup> Immediately following her discussion of the quote from Hitler, she says "In India they have a word whose original meaning is 'balance', which stands at the same time for the order of the world and justice" (Weil 2002, 280).

To understand the importance of Weil's phrase "perfect obedience" in this passage we have to recognise that concepts like slavery and servitude are all associated with force: these are cases where we are made to serve someone or something else, not because we consent to it, but because the 'master' has, in some way, power over us. The one obeying in slavery or servitude is, like the weaker force in Hitler's picture, docile or crushed. These concepts do not apply to the universe's submission to providence or order because force itself is subject to this submission: it would be confused to apply the notion of force to the sovereignty of something else over force. Instead, Weil describes how the universe "passively accepts" these determinations; it submits itself to the determinations and limits of the world. It is passive because it involves the forces of the universe not just acting and moving, but in submitting itself to something else. Whilst I think it would be misleading to say the universe 'willingly' accepts this, it does do so out of its own determinate nature, and not because of the influence of an external force.

This can perhaps also give us a way of understanding why Weil frequently associates obedience with the beautiful. Weil describes the "luminous clarity" of "look[ing] ... upon the beauty of the world as the radiance of this perfect obedience" (Weil 2002, 293). Elsewhere she describes "it is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty" (Weil 1951, 129). If we understand obedience as the reason that natural bodies and systems have shape, it is this obedience which gives nature **form**. Seeing things in the world as obedient in this way means recognising how forces "balance one against the other, brought to form a united whole which we do not understand, but which we call beauty" (Weil 2002, 10).

As I have understood this, the conception of obedience operative here is not a departure from Weil's ethical conception of obedience, but is an extension of it. There is a mistaken way of thinking about obedience as the submission of a weaker person or power to the stronger. This view takes the paradigm of an obedient person to be a slave or servant. For Weil, this is mistaken because true obedience does not come from force (being forced) but from consent. This fallacy also extends to the way we think about the natural world: we think of force and domination as sovereign and see the fundamental law of the universe as the dominance of the powerful over the weak. But this picture again misplaces the true sovereignty of nature in force, and causes us to fail to recognise the order and balance to which those forces are ultimately subject. The concept of obedience in both cases enables us to recognise the one obeying as taking a place within a

broader system of ordered parts, with its own determinate role and limits: a monk accepts and recognises his place within a monastic community; a wave in the sea rises and then "is arrested and forced to redescend" (Weil 2002, 281). To recognise this is to recognise our own limits.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this essay I have explored Weil's conception of obedience as developed across political, ethical, and theological contexts. In the first section, I identified two distinct ways of interpretation of obedience in contemporary thought: firstly, as a political concept which limits personal freedom and responsibility, and secondly, as a Christian virtue which is linked to education. I argued that Weil's writings show influence from both these strands and point to a tension which can be seen to motivate Weil's thought on obedience: namely, that obedience to authority seems to be both ethically and practically necessary, whilst also being a potentially very dangerous component of social structures.

In the second section I explored Weil's own conception of obedience as something which "presupposes consent" (Weil 2002, 13). I argued that this treatment of obedience brings aspects of the Christian picture of obedience to bear on political topics by developing a conception of obedience which is distinct from mere submission or force. In Weil's interpretation, obedience is not something which suppresses an individual's own thought and conscience, but is even dependent on it. I have shown how her emphasis on consent as the fundamental source or "mainspring" of obedience acknowledges both the practical and ethical necessity of obedience in modern society, as well as the dangers of obedience taken as the complete submission of the will to those in power.

Finally, I demonstrated how this account of obedience extends beyond the human and into the natural world. I argued that Weil's concept of human obedience is situated within a wider metaphysical account of the relationship between physical force, and the limit or order which gives form to the universe as a whole: a relationship which is itself understood in moral terms.

In brief, I have shown that there is an important consistency in Weil's treatment of obedience throughout these diverse topics: her political treatment of obedience is deeply ingrained in a Christian theological tradition, and this account is used to illuminate an understanding of the natural world which is ethically

loaded. Her metaphysical and political writings have a shared ethical point, offering us a way to push back against a misconception about power and limit in both the human and the natural world. By reconciling the pragmatic and moral need for obedience with an understanding of the dangers of obedience taken without limit, Weil offers us a novel way of thinking about obedience which could help us navigate this difficult tension.

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