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AN ECONOMIC THEORISTS' READING OF SIMONE WEIL*

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In Economics individuals are defined by their preferences over the consequences of their own actions and the actions carried out by others. In contrast, Simone Weil depicts the individual as continuously re-constituted by the contact that he establishes with reality via his action. Such an action is aimed at achieving an effect in the physical world, but what makes it *human* is not success per se, but rather the fact that it stems from reasoning and planning. *Affliction* is caused by effort carried out mechanically like that of a beast of burden, when the individual has no opportunity to exercise reason for choosing how to confront reality's ever-challenging hazards and *necessity.*

Simone Weil also emphasizes the importance of the socially forged *language* in affecting the individual's horizon and his ability to act meaningfully. In particular, foresight cannot be assumed in situations of oppression and affliction, which are extremely hard to communicate exactly because they imply an alienation between reason and action.

These observations of Simone Weil suggest new dimensions which standard economic modelling has hitherto avoided.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The individual in economics

In Economics each individual is identified by her set of preferences (see e.g. Becker 1996). The preferences are not over commodity bundles for

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immediate consumption, but rather – much more generally – over streams of actions by the individual herself, by other individuals, and by nature (representing the gradual resolution of uncertainty), from the present moment onwards.

For instance, people have preferences over the ratio of tomatoes to cucumbers in their salad (and they choose a salad composition they like most among those they can afford, given their budget constraint and the vegetable prices in the market). They also have preferences over compositions of salad sizes today and tomorrow (and given the constraints on their ability to save from today to tomorrow or borrow today on account of their income tomorrow, they choose a feasible bundle of salads – today's salad and tomorrow's salad – which they like most).

People take into consideration that today's consumption may affect their tastes tomorrow. Consuming cigarettes today might cause addiction, and a higher propensity to consume them tomorrow. Also, other people's actions may influence tomorrow's tastes, e.g. exposing children to classical music may influence their taste for such music when they grow up.

Furthermore, these effects are typically uncertain, giving rise to different potential circumstances and tastes which may materialize in the course of time. Considering these contingencies and their plausibility, the individual can compare the desirability of different sequences of actions that she can take along different realizations of these contingencies, and thus choose a strategy – a contingent plan of actions – to be realized as uncertainty unfolds with time.[1]

Thus, an individual is modelled by a very complex and rich entity – her preference relation over contingent plans of actions. Phrased with this level of abstraction and generality, the modelling framework may seem to account for every relevant aspect one may need to address when analysing individuals' behaviour and well-being. It is no wonder that this framework has gained a prominent position in Economics, and more generally in the public discourse.

This framework has several important features.

(1) The individual is a *monad*. She is not only physically an entity separate from other individuals, but also mentally so. Other physical objects and other individuals do not form part of her psychic apparatus. Only their *actions* can influence her *well-being*; but the individual herself – i.e. her preferences – is well defined irrespective of the realized actions.

[1] Typically, economics models assume some consistency constraints on this complex preference relation, expressing various extents of rationality. Whether and which such constraints are assumed will have no implications for our discussion here. Also the question whether this model is "scientific ", i.e. refutable à la Popper, will not concern us here.

It is only the *set* of potential streams of actions, of herself and of others, which is needed to define the preferences of the individual.

(2) Relatedly, the individual remains *fixed in time.* Her preference relation remains immutable irrespective of changes in her surrounding. In particular, if some other individuals hurt her, or disappear, or die, the preference relation of the individual does not change: such events simply correspond to potential actions of these individuals (or of nature), and the preference relation of the individuals over such combinations of actions is well defined in advance.

(3) The individual is *purposeful.* Her goal is to secure an alternative course of actions ranked highest by her preference relation, and the extent to which this goal is achieved is the yardstick for individual well-being. Actions are to be judged solely on the basis of their *consequences.*

(4) The individual has a complete understanding of the environment in which she is acting. If some act has an uncertain outcome, then the individual knows how to describe a set of relevant potential states among which one will materialize, and the outcome to which the act will lead in each of these states. In other words, the individual *masters the language* needed to describe the factors which determine her lot depending on her available choices.

(5) In most economic applications, a choice consists of a pair – a bundle of *goods* (sometimes physical goods, sometimes abstract goods – e.g. prestige, influence etc.), and the *effort* needed to attain this bundle. In such applications, the outcome is more desirable the more there is of the goods, and the less is the effort.

1.2 Simone Weil's thought

Simone Weil was a philosopher, a social activist, a religious mystic and a French patriot. Few can remain indifferent to her exceptional and intensive life story[2] and her deep and penetrating writings. During her short life (1909–1943) she produced thousands of written pages of essays and notes, that *Editions Gallimard* is still editing. These writings portray, simultaneously, a clear and analytic mind as well as a personal struggle manifesting the very metaphysical issues she was analysing.

For an economic theorist, her writings are no less than shaking. She puts forward a coherent model of what an individual is, and what individual well-being is about, which is very different from the model economists use, as described above.

Simone Weil was one of the first French women to graduate the École Normale Supérieure, the prestigious Grande École in Paris. After three years of philosophy teaching in high schools, she took a year of leave.

[2] Siân Miles [A] provides an illuminating introduction.

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During that year she first finished her essay "Reflections concerning the causes of liberty and social oppression". Then she went to experience first-hand the life of factory workers by taking such a job herself. Among other places she worked at the Renault factory. The following letter, written to a friend at that period, encapsulates important aspects of her thought. She writes[3]:

> Dear Albertine,
>
> . . . I now see the social problem in this way: What a factory ought to be is something like what you felt that day at Saint-Chamond, and what I have so often felt – a place where one makes a hard and painful, but nevertheless joyful, contact with real life. Not the gloomy place it is where people only obey orders, and have all their humanity broken down, and become degraded lower than the machines.
>
> On one occasion I experienced fully the thing that I had glimpsed, like you, from the outside. It was at my first place. Imagine me in front of a great furnace which vomits flames and scorching heat full in my face. The fire comes from five or six openings at the bottom of the furnace. I stand right in front of it to insert about thirty large metal bobbins, which are made by an Italian woman with a brave and open countenance who is just alongside me. These bobbins are for the trams and metros. I have to take great care that they don't fall into the open holes, because they would melt. Therefore I must stand close up to the furnace and not make any clumsy movement, in spite of the scorching heat on my face and the fire on my arms (which still shows the burns). I close the shutter and wait a few minutes; then I open it and draw the red-hot bobbins out with a hook. I must do it very quickly or else the last ones would begin to melt, and must take even greater care lest any of them fall into the open holes. And then I do it all over again. A welder with a serious expression and dark spectacles sits opposite me, working intently. Each time I wince from the furnace heat on my face, he looks at me with a sad smile of fraternal sympathy which does me untold good. On the other side, around some big tables, is a group of armature winders. They work together as a team, like brothers, carefully and without haste.

Simone Weil goes on to describe how the factory experience might change one's self-perception and even the individual's capacity to express her own feelings and circumstances.

> . . . What working in a factory meant for me personally was as follows. It meant that all the external reasons (which I had previously thought internal) upon which my sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, was based were radically destroyed within two or three weeks by the daily experience of brutal constraint. And don't imagine that this provoked in me any rebellious reaction. No, on the contrary: it produced the last thing I expected from myself – docility. The resigned docility of a beast of burden. It seemed to me that I was born to wait for, and receive, and carry out orders – that I

[3] [SL]; appears also in [A], pp. 14–15.

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> had never done and never would do anything else. I am not proud of that confession. It is the kind of suffering no worker talks about: It is too painful even to think of it. . . .

These two paragraphs portray two central pillars of Simone Weil's thought. The first is about the primacy of *action,* and the conditions necessary for this action to be *human.* The second is about the primacy of the socially forged *language* in continuously shaping one's identity. We will consider each of these in turn. Consequently, we will examine if and how these ideas can be reconciled with the standard economic modelling of human beings, and to which extent a new modelling approach is called for.

2. ACTION

For Simone Weil, a person exists in virtue of the *contact* that he establishes *with reality.*

A human being is distinguished by his intelligence, by his ability to use abstract, mathematical-style reasoning for planning methodically how to carry out an *action* in the world. For example, when a person wants to lift a rock, he first sets aside and plans a lever with which he will be able to carry out the task.

In the realm of abstract planning, the person has complete control. However, "as long as one employs method on symbols, one remains within the limits of a sort of game".[4] If A implies B and B implies C, the consequence that A implies C may require mental effort to deduce, but this consequence is, inherently, already there in the premises. The fact that A -> B and B -> C entail A -> C is *literally* trivial, and hence static in nature. In this sense, if one were to confine oneself to abstract reasoning, "nothing would ever get done".[5]

At the other end, reality is characterized by the multitude of hazards and accidents which no intelligent planning, however meticulous, could ever hope to neutralize completely. The lever functions most of the times, but sometimes it slides or breaks down. A better device can then be planned, but no human-envisaged device could ever be fault-free.

This has two important implications. First, as a matter of fact, it is *futile* to hope for a complete mastery of the world, for a state of affairs in which plans will be exercised exactly as in abstract, methodical planning. Second, and more importantly, such a hope would amount to a hope that reality would be transformed into an abstract, intellectual game. This would mean the end of human vitality, characterized by a contact with an ever-challenging haphazard world.

[4] [LP], p. 73.
[5] ibid.

Hence, human efforts have an inherent dialectic character: they are aimed at achieving a physical effect in the real world, but at the same time "intellectual virtue consists (. . .) in never making it the slave of success".[6] Simone Weil brings two quotations to illustrate this dialectic character of action:

> Kant: 'The dove, when in its free flight it strikes the air and feels resistance, might well believe that it would fly better in a void.' (The dove – that is thought; air – that is the world).
> Bacon: 'Man has command over nature only by obeying it.'[7]

Here is therefore one sharp contrast with the economic model of well-being. According to the economic model, a person is better off the more successful he is in achieving real effects that he likes (point 3 above). For Simone Weil, in contrast, success is the wrong yardstick. Rather, "All Human progress consists in changing constraint into an obstacle".[8] That is, progress takes place when a constraint, which seems to be an insurmountable barrier, turns into an obstacle – a challenge with which a person can cope using his intelligence; whether or not the obstacle is eventually removed at any particular instance does not effect the more substantial issue – namely the vital encounter between the person's mind and the physical world.

This idea is elaborated further when she analyses the idea of oppression:

> True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action; the absolutely free man would be he whose every action proceeded from a preliminary judgment concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end. It matters little whether the actions in themselves are easy or painful, or even whether they are crowned with success; pain and failure can make a man unhappy, but cannot humiliate him as long as it is he himself who disposes of his own capacity for action.[9]

This idea has profound implications regarding the kind of society one would aim at approaching. The economic model implies (point 5 above) that a Utopian world would be one in which everything pleasurable were attainable without effort. Simone Weil rejects the idea that such a state of affairs is desirable: "an existence from which the very notion of work had pretty well disappeared would be delivered over to the play of passions

[6] [LP], p. 74.
[7] [LP], p. 89.
[8] [LP], p. 88.
[9] [LO], p. 85.

and perhaps to madness".[10] For her, a Utopian society is completely different:

> A completely free life would be one wherein all real difficulties presented themselves as kinds of problems, wherein all successes were as solutions carried into action.
>
> . . . It is not possible to conceive of a nobler destiny for man than that which brings him directly to grips with naked necessity, without his being able to expect anything except through his own exertions, and such that his life is a continual creation of himself by himself.[11]

Here, there becomes apparent a second important divergence from economic modelling. While in economic theory preferences – which essentially define the person – are fixed and immutable (point 2 above), according to Simone Weil a person re-creates himself continuously.[12]

The manual worker at the production line is indeed in direct contact with the harsh physical reality, but the method behind the production line was crafted in the mind of somebody else – that of the engineer.

> You cannot say in such a case that the action is, strictly speaking, methodical; it is in accordance with method, which is a very different thing. The difference is capital; for he who applies method has no need to conceive it in his mind at the moment he is applying it.[13]
>
> As opposed to this, the only mode of production absolutely free would be that in which methodical thought was in operation throughout the course of work. The difficulties to be overcome would have to be so varied that it would never be possible to apply ready-made rules; not of course that the part played by acquired knowledge would be nil; but it is necessary that the worker should be obliged always to bear in mind the guiding principle behind the work in hand, so as to be able to apply it intelligently to ever-new sets of circumstances.
>
> (. . .) Furthermore, it goes without saying that the degree of complexity of the difficulties to be solved must never be too great, on pain of bringing about a split between thought and action.
>
> (. . .) To achieve this end it would be enough if man were no longer to aim at extending his knowledge and power indefinitely, but rather at establishing, both in his research and in his work, a certain balance between the mind and the object to which it is being applied.[14]

[10] [LO], p. 84.
[11] [LO], pp. 86–7.
[12] This processual view of the self will be reinforced shortly when we discuss the primacy of language.
[13] [LO], p. 92.
[14] [LO], pp. 95–6.

A major problem preventing such a balance is the control exercised by some individuals over others in the organization of work. An alternative organization, based on consent, is a prerequisite for such a balance:

> . . . a team of workers on a production-line under the eye of a foreman is a sorry spectacle, whereas it is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building trade, checked by some difficulty, ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then apply unanimously the method conceived by one of them, who may or may not have any official authority over the remainder. At such moments the image of a free society appears almost in its purity.[15]

Here is, of course, another divergence with the economic notion of progress and growth. This economic notion lacks completely the balance to which Simone Weil refers. Economic growth simply means producing more desirable goods with less effort (point 5 above). It has nothing to say about the process in which this production takes place, on the relation between thought and action in the mind of the workers who carry out the production.

According to Simone Weil, the lack of such a relation is the deep source of the workers' *oppression*.

> Manual work . . . is performed not for a result but because of a need, 'since you've got to make a living' as people say whose existence is spent doing just that. It means exerting effort whose sole end is to secure no more than what one already has, while failure to exert such effort results in losing it. But in human effort, the only source of energy is desire. It is not in a person's nature to desire what he already has. Desire is a tendency, the start of a movement towards something, towards a point from which one is absent. If, at the very outset, this movement doubles back on itself towards the point of departure, a person turns round and round like a squirrel in a cage or a prisoner in a condemned cell. Constant turning soon produces revulsion.
>
> (. . .) [For such workers] the unit of time is a day and they oscillate like a ball bouncing off two walls, from work to sleep, working so as to eat, eating so as to continue to work and so on *ad nauseam.* In this sort of existence, everything is an intermediary, a means from which all finality is excluded.
>
> (. . .) The emptiness of such a life is only bearable . . . [via compensations like] mindless pleasure or violence. In both, illusion is substituted for objective. (. . .) Enjoyments of this sort act like a drug and drugs are always a temptation to those who are suffering. Revolution itself is a similar sort of compensation.
>
> (. . .) [Such] painful emptiness . . . does not kill but is perhaps as painful as hunger. It might literally be true that bread is less necessary than the relief of such pain.[16]

[15] [LO], p. 101.
[16] [DL], pp. 244–8.

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These are not only the workers who are degraded by the control of their foreman. At the same time, it is also the foreman who is degraded by de-humanizing his subordinates, thus becoming "the slave of slaves", by denying himself the contact with the world's Necessity once the force he directs at them makes "his orders seem to him to contain within themselves some mysterious efficacy"[17] – similar to the absolute efficacy in the realm of abstract reasoning when devoid of contact with reality.[18]

3. LANGUAGE

In "Lectures on Philosophy" a detailed analysis is devoted to the primacy of *language*. Simone Weil makes the point that there are no immediate perceptions which are not mediated to us via language. The ideas of space, of time, of an infinite sequence, of an ideal width-less straight line – all of these rely on a notion of an *order* which is absent from raw sensations per se, an order which is shaped by the language in use.[19] The use of language evokes emotions (for instance, when expressing the name of a far-away lover, or when a leader delivers a speech); and it enables us to come to grips with the world, because it is the medium with which we contemplate and plan methodically for the physical actions that we will subsequently carry out in the physical world.

Since language is a social construct, society has a decisive influence on the individual via language (and in contrast with the monadic view of the individual in economic modelling):

> This influence makes itself felt first of all by the very fact that language exists. Society, it must be said, is not an aggregate of individuals; the individual is something that comes after society, who exists through society; it is society plus something else. The order is: society, individual.
>
> (. . .) What is more, it is through the particular characteristics of such and such a language that society exerts its influence.
>
> (. . .) Words have many senses, like:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | (. . .) value | of money |
> | | moral value |
> | | courage of a thoughtful, deliberate nature |
> | property | personal possessions |
> | | essential characteristics |
> | fortune | goods and money |
> | | chance |

[17] [LO], p. 96.

[18] For Simone Weil, the idea of obedience emanating solely from consent is central throughout her thought. When she discusses the relationship between the citizen and the state in "The Need for Roots", liberty and obedience is the first pair of dialectically balancing needs she lists among "the needs of the soul" ([NR], pp. 12–15).

[19] Peter Winch, in his introduction to Weil's "Lectures on Philosophy" and in his book "Simone Weil: The Just Balance" (Winch 1989) has explored the affinities of these ideas to those developed concurrently and independently by Wittgenstein.

> (. . .) So, language itself already contains thoughts.
>
> (. . .) due to language, we are steeped in an intellectual environment. It is impossible for us to have thoughts which are not related to all the thoughts bequeathed to us through language.[20]

The other side of the same token is that genuine truth cannot always be expressed, when language lacks the vocabulary to mediate it.

> Just as the vagrant accused of stealing a carrot from a field stands before a comfortably seated judge who keeps up an elegant flow of queries, comments and witticisms while the accused is unable to stammer a word, so truth stands before an intelligence which is concerned with the elegant manipulation of opinions.[21]

The truth of affliction is an important example:

> To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking. To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction, or in near danger of it, is to annihilate oneself. It is more difficult than suicide would be for a happy child. Therefore the afflicted are not listened to. They are like someone whose tongue has been cut out and who occasionally forgets the fact. When they move their lips no ear perceives the sound. And they themselves soon sink into impotence in the use of language, because of the certainty of not being heard.
>
> This is why there is no hope for the vagrant as he stands before the magistrate. Even if, through his stammerings, he should utter a cry to pierce the soul, neither the magistrate nor the public will hear it. His cry is mute. And the afflicted are nearly always equally deaf to one another; and each of them, constrained by the general indifference, strives by means of self-delusion or forgetfulness to become deaf to his own self.[22]

This is, of course, in sharp contrast with the economic modelling, in which an individual always masters the language needed to describe the factors influencing his fate (point 4 above).

4. ANALYSIS

In the first section of the paper we isolated five main characteristics of the standard economic model. As we saw, Simone Weil offers arguments against all five.

In contrast with point 1 (the monadic nature of the individual), she emphasizes the role of language and of the social organization for the attainment of "a certain balance between the mind and the object to which it is being applied", a central feature of her notion of individual well-being and identity.

[20] [LP], p. 74–5.
[21] [HP], p. 68.
[22] [HP], p. 71.

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In contrast with point 2 (the stability of identity over time), she insists on the continual re-creation of the individual in the process of encountering Necessity.

In contrast with the consequentialist approach, point 3 (and of course also to its more specific expression, point 5), she defines human liberty in terms of the relationship between thought and action, not between desire and satisfaction.

Even more radically, her description of affliction, and of her own experience as a factory worker, is in sharp contrast with point 4, the assumption that the individual has always access to a language which is rich enough to describe the environment in which she is acting, and the possible effects of her choices.

To better asses the impact of Simone Weil's critique, it is important to understand the way in which the five characteristics of the standard model influence the practice of the "working economist". By looking at the list, one sees that only one point, 5, concerns specific applications of the model, while the other four, 1–4, are of an axiomatic nature, "rules of syntax" of the standard model. To interpret them as factual claims delimiting the scope of the model would be a crucial mistake, with the likely effect of reducing by much the impact of Simone Weil's critique.

Many economists are well aware of the limitations of tenets 1–4 as a description of reality. They are nevertheless willing to accept them as constraints on the language they use even when they investigate a very wide spectrum of choice problems. This is because these rules of syntax impose *methodological discipline*.

To abide by the *formal* syntax of monadic, stable and consequentialist preferences, the domain of preferences is often *stretched* so as to include consequences that are, in fact, neither 'monadic' nor 'stable' in nature. For example, an altruistic attitude is encompassed by endowing the individual with preferences which depend also on the consumption of others: the more they consume, the better off is the altruistic individual. Additional other-regarding attitudes, like a delight of having and consuming more than others do, or reciprocating an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, can be similarly incorporated in the individual's preferences. This is done by defining the relevant consequences as combinations of everybody's actions, and letting the preference order over these actions reflect the above-mentioned attitudes.

In a similar vein, we have already mentioned in the introduction how the foreseen effects of addiction, habits, advertising or fashion, which influence the individual's propensity to consume various commodities over time, can be incorporated into a *formally stable* preference relation. This is done by defining consequences to be streams of actions, and letting preferences depend not only on the current actions but also on past and future ones. Oftentimes, this dependence is specified by introducing

parameters like "personal capital" or "social capital" into the utility function that represents the individual's preferences, and describing how such parameters depend on past behaviour (e.g. Becker 1996). For example, drug consumption is analysed just like a standard investment problem: the individual foresees all the effects of taking drugs on her future choices and experiences, but values the gain in utility today more than the discounted flow of utility losses due to addiction. If taking drugs affects the social status, or the self-perception of the individual, one just needs to redefine the notion of a consequence to incorporate these aspects.

It may be disputable whether among all potential formalisms which could impose methodological discipline on social scientists, the standard economic formalism is the most *natural* syntax to describe human attitudes and behaviour. Furthermore, one may argue that the language of monadic, stable and consequentialist preferences permeate and bias the public discourse, so as to portray even disempowered individuals as morally responsible for their own self-crippling choices, and at the same time to legitimize individual self-interested choices which cripple others.[23] Last, it may be illuminating to investigate how *homo oeconomicus* reflects the spirit of enlightenment which forms the basis of modernity, and hence our resistance to any alternative syntax by which the individual would not be fully sovereign or autonomous.

At the same time, it should still be admitted that formally, the economic model is very flexible and its scope is vast. In particular, the implied critique of Simone Weil on tenets 1–3 could, *in principle,* be accommodated *within* the standard economic model by a re-interpretation of terms. For example one could define "vitality" as one dimension of the consequences of individual actions, and let it be affected by social interaction, experience, etc.

However, when the modeller writes down an explicit "production function" for abstract commodities or consequences entering the individual's utility, the implicit assumption is that the individual fully understands the final effect of her choices, even when these choices are immensely complicated entities. Thus, the substantial axiom, and the one which gives bite to the other axioms 1–3, is the assumption of "*transparency*", tenet 4: whatever the modeller describes in the model is also fully understood by the agents in the model. The importance

[23] If economic models do not only reflect and represent reality, but also influence reality by framing the public discourse with a particular vocabulary, it is not tenable that economic modeling per se is the type of abstraction that in principle alienates and denies direct contact with reality (in which "one employs method on symbols" and hence "remains within the limits of a sort of game" [LP], p. 73). Abandoning any hope for transforming and enriching the abstract mathematical language of economic models might amount to leaving the monopoly of public discourse to the standard model and its vocabulary, too poor to discuss many real social phenomena.

of point 4 may be appreciated by reading its statement at the very beginning of one of the canonical texts on Game Theory: "a player in the game is *intelligent* if he knows everything that we know about the game and he can make any inference about the situation that we can make" (Myerson 1991: 4). Myerson also spells out a fundamental reason why one should think hard before abandoning the assumption of transparency: "an argument for reform of social institutions (rather than for the reeducation of individuals) is most persuasive when it is based on a model that assumes that individuals intelligently understand their environment and rationally act to maximize their own welfare" (Myerson 1999: 1069).

Nevertheless, it is precisely this axiom of "transparency" which comes under Simone Weil's scrutiny. Oppressed people, she claims, do not "intelligently understand their environment" . This is so not because they are stupid. Rather, it is because oppression and affliction narrow down the language with which reality is mediated to them, with which they perceive themselves, and with which they phrase their aspirations to themselves and to others. It is not the absence of some bits of information which constrains them. Much more fundamentally, they lack the vocabulary to comprehend available information, and to render it meaningful and useful. The vagrant in front of the magistrate, and certainly Simone Weil at the Renault factory did not become foolish. But under oppression people "sink into impotence in the use of language, (. . .) are nearly always equally deaf to one another; and each of them (. . .) strives by means of self-delusion or forgetfulness to become deaf to his own self".

It should thus be very clear that, whatever our abilities and tastes for abstraction, the assumption of transparency, 4, is absolutely incompatible with Simone Weil's vision and thought. If we want to capture in a formal model at least some aspects of the picture of the individual that she puts forward in her writings, we should at the same time introduce new terms *and* abandon the assumption that individuals always dispose of the language relevant to assess how their choices would affect their well-being. This challenge is still open.

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