Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Education

Ann Sharp and Maughn Gregory

Abstract: The writings of Simone Weil support a feminist philosophy of education that locates freedom in self-determined creative work within contexts of necessity. In particular, Weil's discussion of Force, the Good, Work, Method and Time provide criteria for a feminist philosophy of education, in terms of educational ends and means. Philosophy for Children is relevant to each of these themes, in various ways.

Redefining Women's Personhood

Despite the feminist revolution, women in every part of the world continue to suffer violence and injustice disproportionately to men. Today women comprise two-thirds of the world's working class, yet they receive only one-tenth of the world's income, and own one one-hundredth of the world's property. (Williams, 37.) Women perform over eighty percent of the world's low-skilled jobs and constitute two-thirds of the world's illiterate people. (Ibid.) Women take work in factories, sweat shops, domestic service and sex industries, not out of desire, but out of need and a lack of meaningful choice, in patriarchal societies that not only limit their options but deprive them of educational opportunities to qualify for better-paying jobs, let alone to develop critical awareness of their limited options. To be truly liberated, women must participate in the development of new conceptions of justice, freedom, education and other aspects of personhood, by engaging in a philosophical reckoning with experience. As bell hooks has observed, there are aspects of our lived experience not yet addressed in any of our ideas or language. They are real; they are felt; but they remain inarticulate unless and until we find the means to give them voice: to invent language sufficient to make the experiences into objects of inquiry. In hooks' terms, this is the liberatory potential of theory.[1] By this standard, education that leaves students (male and female) incapacitated to engage in the building and negotiating of theory is neglectful and oppressive.

In thinking toward a feminist philosophy of education from our own locality (early 21st-century, eastern United States), we have found it helpful to consult the works of Simone Weil. Though Weil could hardly be called a feminist in the modern sense of the term, her writings afford valuable insights into the construction of a viable feminist philosophy. In particular, Weil's work offers feminist philosophy the following:

- A model of doing philosophy that involves reckoning with her own experience and that of underprivileged people with whom she lived and worked, resulting in theory that is not divorced from practice;
- A treatment of some of the issues essential for any philosophy of personhood – including language, relationships, reasonableness, methods, self, attention, time, creative work, and the good;
- A model of doing philosophy that draws on the work of earlier philosophers but is stridently original;
- Theory that is rational, yet practical enough to be applicable to a wide variety of local concerns, and is sufficiently non-traditional to resist easy categorization in terms of conservative or progressive.[2]

Although Weil would not have considered herself an educational theorist, her writings on metaphysics, social philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics speak directly and indirectly to educational concerns. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on her single essay on education,[3] we have selected, from several of her works, five concepts, Weil's treatment of which provide criteria for a feminist philosophy of education, in terms of educational ends and means: Force, the Good, Work, Method and Time. In what follows we begin to articulate these criteria and relate them to one another, and show how the materials and methods of Philosophy for Children are more and less relevant to these criteria.

Force

> Force, that X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense. It makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was there and the next minute, there is nobody at all. (Weil 1970, 4.)

Ann Margaret Sharp and Maughn Gregory are faculty in the Department of Educational Foundations at Montclair State University. Maughn is the Director and Ann is the Associate Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children.

When a woman asks herself how it is that she is in the condition she is, she discovers very soon that she is powerless against a number of forces. Weil described force as that which we cannot change, noting that "subjection to it is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently in proportion to its value." (1962a, 26.) Force can take many forms; it can be internal or external. External force can be caused by humans or by non-human nature. Weil described the propensity of human beings to use force on one another as the opposite of love,[4] and she condemned such force in both its individual and social manifestations.

One force relevant to women's struggles is political oppression in its myriad forms, which Weil typically categorized as types of totalitarianism, emerging from both the Right and the Left. Weil criticized totalitarianism as an overt political movement, but also as the tendency of monarchies to cultivate the "idolizing of the State in the person of the sovereign," (2002, 117) as the tendency of democracies to become "inhuman, brutal, bureaucratic, police-ridden State[s]" (Ibid., 127) and as the tendency of political parties to coerce unity "by dint of expulsion for the crime of having an opinion of one's own." (Ibid., 31.) It is largely these same tendencies that feminist philosophers have denounced as "patriarchal," and of course, these tendencies are ubiquitous in all levels of society. They are found in families, in companies, in schools, and in churches, as well as in the offices of government. Bringing such tendencies to public attention and critique must become a preliminary focus of a feminist philosophy of education.

Because of her insights into the temporal and spiritual human needs for rootedness, Weil argued that, "We must obey the state, however it happens to be," but added that this obligation has one valid limit: "a revolt on the part of conscience." (Ibid., 176-7.) Freedom of conscience, of course, depends upon freedom of the intellect, and Weil argued persuasively that propaganda—including especially the influences of popular media—is a form of violent constraint upon these freedoms:

> [T]he need of freedom itself, so essential to the intellect, calls for a corresponding protection against suggestion, propaganda, influence by means of obsession. These are methods of constraint, a special kind of constraint, not accompanied by fear or physical distress, but which is none the less a form of violence. Modern technique places extremely potent instruments at its service. (Ibid., 25-6.)

The modern techniques Weil had in mind were primarily newspaper and radio. One need not agree with her creative suggestions for legally curtailing propaganda[5] to acknowledge that the political, economic and moral messages and images that infiltrate so much of our space and time through the technologies of mass communication constitute a formidable force with which we must continually contend. The commercial success of the fashion and cosmetics industries testifies to the effectiveness of commercial media in encouraging women to think that the good life is one of sensation, consumerism, and projecting a certain image for the public (masculine) gaze. Certainly men fall prey to such propaganda too, but the consequences they suffer are proportionately far less debilitating.

Weil's insight that objectification is a universal aspect of the experience of force does not imply that women and men, or people of different ethnic, religious, sexual, age, social and economic groups experience such objectification equally. The evils of debilitation and objectification brought about by force and the injustice of social systems in which forces are likely to afflict different populations unequally were two negative moral aspects of force Weil addressed.

Weil also addressed a positive moral aspect of force: the necessity of force as a factor in human cognitive and moral growth:

> For there is no self-mastery without discipline, and there is no other source of discipline for man than the effort demanded in overcoming external obstacles…. It is the obstacles we encounter that have to be overcome which gives us the opportunity for self-conquest. (1979, 3.)

This understanding of growth entails an understanding of freedom, not always as the absence of force, but more often as the intelligent integration of, and adaptation to force. And if force is a necessary factor for growth, and if women and men encounter forces different in quality and quantity, it follows that women's experience can lead to unique forms of intelligent contention.

Confronting necessity and coming to accept it is part of the process of acting to fulfill our own purposes, doing what we think upon reflection is the best, not just for the individual, but for all of us. In this regard, women's oppression can be a key to greater capacities for creativity and compassion:

> The sense of human misery is a precondition of justice and love. He who does not realize to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit cannot regard others as fellow creatures nor love himself…. Only he who has measured the dominion of force and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice. (1970, 27.)

A feminist philosophy of education must take account of the learner as a purposive being contending with force, and must make creative and meaningful contention with

force one of the most general ends of education. Women's education must help them to critically reflect on their experiences of force, to articulate these experiences to each other and to men, to learn to employ traditional methods for contending with force, to construct new methods, and to evaluate the directions of personal and social growth opened by doing so.

Helping children and adults wake up to the political, ethical, aesthetic and other philosophical aspects of their experience by problematizing what used to be taken for granted—to develop "a philosophical ear"— is one of the most important contributions Philosophy for Children could make to such an educational endeavor. The program's insistence on philosophy as inquiry into the concerns and the lived experiences of its participants makes it an effective vehicle for consciousness-raising. Another important contribution is the method of inquiry practiced in the program. Philosophical dialogue employs sophisticated cognitive and emotional tools for analyzing our experiences of force and for generating novel hypotheses for effective contention with force. However, the tendency of Philosophy for Children to construe the philosophical relevance of experience in strictly discursive terms—in terms of puzzling concepts or conceptual problems, to be resolved through reasoned dialogue[6]—can be a limitation with regard to education for contending with force. Unless the discoveries of the dialogue are tested in action, they can never be efficacious in the resistance and redirection of force, or in human growth.

The Good

If our contention with force is to be meaningful, it cannot be arbitrary but must be oriented toward what we take to be right or good. Autonomy does not consist of self-indulgence, but in self-mastery and self-creation in quest of what is meaningful or good. Weil's conception of the good is at once, and explicitly, both natural and super-natural. The source of goodness, she argues, must be that "realm of what is eternal, universal, [and] unconditioned[, being] other than the one conditioned by facts." (2002, 4.) Weil's metaphysics are Christian Platonic, and her writings on most subjects are flecked with phrases such as "a spiritual sphere," (2002, 199) "supernatural grace" (Ibid., 112), "supernatural mechanisms" (Ibid., 261) other-worldly certitude,[7] absolute good (Ibid., 199), and God.[8] However, Weil's conception of the good is non-sectarian;[9] and in spite of being overtly Platonic,[10] it is earthy. Put another way, Weil's supernatural metaphysics was a meta-theory that helped her explain and justify a very naturalist theory of spirituality: one that called for careful thinking, the expansion of consciousness, compassion, and action in the here and now, as the only legitimate manifestation of the supernatural order of things. For instance, Weil vehemently criticized the "spurious spirituality," of charity work performed for the love of God, the recipients of which become merely "raw material …, an anonymous means whereby one's love of God can be manifested." (Ibid., 156.)

Weil saw our relationship to the good as involving desire, discernment and action. She promoted Plato's non-pluralist idea of absolute Good as "compris[ing] within itself in a superlative degree all forms of the good," which therefore "possess similar properties to [it]." (2002, 299.) This explains our ability to discern goodness in the beauty of the world (Ibid., 291), in the objects of our compassion (Ibid., 171), and in the soul's authentic needs.[11] To become moral agents vis-à-vis the forces with which we contend, we must not only develop our skills of thinking, but also our powers of attention to, and discernment of such instances of the good:

> The pure and authentic values, beauty, truth and goodness, in a human being are the result of one single and same act, a certain application of attention at its fullest to the object. Teaching should have no other aim but to prepare, by training, the attention for the possibility of such an act. (1952b, 84.)

This kind of attention and discernment is not primarily intellectual. We must learn to see and hear what is beautiful, just, or compassionate—to touch and taste them in our lived experience—as well as learn how to mediate such experiences with language and thought. In Weil's telling metaphor, "Beauty is something to be eaten; it is a food." (2002, 93.) Only by seeing ourselves in relationship to the good as bearers of cherished experiences can we become attached to beauty, respect, justice and other forms of the good.

"Generally speaking," Weil wrote, "the main object of all education should be to increase the feeling of the beauty of the world." (Ibid., 87.) A feminist philosophy of education must include the objective of helping young women and men, and even very young girls and boys become sensitive to the good, the beautiful, the just, the equitable, the healthy, etc., in their own experiences. This involves learning to recognize what is good as qualities of experience—in what we see, hear and otherwise feel. It further involves learning to discern among varying kinds and degrees of beauty, justice, etc. in our experiences. We must help children become more aware of their responses to what they find beautiful and ugly, just and unjust—their desires, preferences, and yearnings—which awareness can strengthen their capacities to actively look for, listen for, and otherwise seek what is good. Children who cultivate a growing sensitivity to these dimensions of value within

their experience through their everyday activities will be better prepared to make moral choices.[12]

In Philosophy for Children, philosophical inquiry is construed as inquiry into problems or puzzlements articulated by the children as they become more and more aware of the aesthetic, ethical, metaphysical and other philosophical dimensions of their own experience.[13] This pedagogy relies on the Deweyan proposition that "ethical," "aesthetic," "political," and other philosophical adjectives describe dimensions of most people's ordinary experience rather than remotely intellectual or esoteric experiences. (Dewey, 17.) It further presupposes that children's experience is just as replete with these philosophical dimensions as is the experience of adults. The philosophical novels published by the IAPC are meant to help children recognize these philosophical aspects of their experience, though we have witnessed children's philosophical dialogues in which the emphasis on discourse is made to overshadow any other kind of attention to non-discursive value experiences. Further, the community of inquiry as it is practiced in Philosophy for Children is ideally an educational activity that enables teachers and students to not merely think about but to directly experience such forms of goodness as the stimulation of the free exchange of ideas, the discipline of rigorous inquiry, the aesthetic qualities of the process of inquiry, interpersonal respect, emotional safety, collaborative achievement, collective self-management, and other forms of associational interdependence.

Work

Weil's writings help us to understand the human condition as being situated between the push of force and the pull of the good. Our autonomy or agency in this position consists in our capacity for creative work, which was one of Weil's most ardent philosophical themes. Against Aristotle, Weil argued that the ideal human relationship to the good was not one of contemplation, but of action: "Once one recognized something as being a good, one should want to seize it. Not to want to do so is cowardly." (2002, 223.) To be a person, for Weil, is to be someone who is constantly trying to create a balance between the necessary in her life and what she perceives as a creative bringing about of the good. Such work is the right of all persons—of women and girls no less than of men and boys.

When our work is self-determined we are giving our consent, our affirmation to the order of the universe; in a real sense, we are affirming the necessity in our own experience. We are determined beings who yet may taste of freedom—a freedom born of understanding, coping with, and transforming our situation in the world. Weil's ideal of creative work thus avoids the reductionism and the enervation of both materialism and idealism.

This ideal involves what Weil calls, "serious thinking," which is "to ask oneself and others just what it is which one is trying to do and whether, therefore, it is being done appropriately." (1952a, 27.) Thoughtful action, or action qualified by continual inquiry, is also our only means for understanding what constitutes the good:

> Action ... possesses a double property with respect to incitations. To begin with, an incitation [toward some good] only becomes real to the mind when it has brought about an action performed by the body…. Action [also] possesses a virtue of quite another order. Many different feelings can co-exist in the heart…. As soon as you step into the sphere of action, the limits are even narrower. You are obliged to effect a new choice …. (2002, 201 & 206)

Of course, not all action is meaningful. Most women in the developing world are condemned to lives of necessity, interpersonal and cultural forces denying them any

opportunity to do creative work. On the other hand, women of privilege have typically been mis-educated into believing that the good life is one in which men take care of them, enabling them to have lives free of turmoil—including the turmoil of creative work—and free for seeking new pleasures. As a result of this socialization many women of privilege have found themselves to be nothing more than parasites on the work of those who do create, as Weil described:

> [T]he reality of life is not sensation but activity …. People who live by sensation are parasites, both materially and morally. And the latter who do not seek sensation in experience, in fact, lead much livelier, profounder, less artificial lives…. The cultivation of sensation implies an egoism which revolts me. It clearly does not prevent love, but it leads some to consider the people that one loves as mere occasions of joy and suffering, and to forget completely that they exist in their own rights. One lives among phantoms, dreaming instead of living. (1965, 12.) [14]

For Weil, there is a real sense in which we are our work; our identity cannot be separated from it.[15] Weil's writings contain several criteria necessary for human labor to be meaningful and conducive of growth. The following criteria apply to women as well as to men, in all contexts of labor and at all levels of employment:

- Conditions for work must be physically safe and compatible with physical and mental health. Weil condemned "the herding of the workers into prison-like structures" (2002, 60) and argued that, "a machine … should be able to be worked without exhausting the muscles, or the nerves, or any organ whatever—and also without cutting or lacerating the flesh, save under very exceptional circumstances." (Ibid., 56.)
- Work should be organized to provide workers with a livelihood, including a decent wage and some form of job security. As Weil noted, the skills and routines required of one's work should not be so discreet and isolated that they are resistant to being adjusted as the requirements of work change (Ibid., 57).
- Work should be conducive of the cognitive, emotional and social growth of the worker, by offering challenges: "We must change … the far too small amount of initiative, skill and thought demanded of [workers], their present exclusion from any imaginative share in the work of the enterprise as a whole …." (Ibid., 55.)
- Work must be socially meaningful to the worker. "We must change [the worker's] sometimes total ignorance of the value, social utility and destination of the things they manufacture, and the complete divorce between working life and family life." (Ibid., 55.) "[If a] workman would be able now and again to show his wife where he works and … [t]he children would come along, after school, to join [then, w]ork would be lit up by poetry …." (Ibid., 60-1.)
- Work must be personally meaningful; something the worker cares about. Weil illustrated this point with a thought/feeling experiment comparing "A happy young woman, expecting her first child, and busy sewing a layette, think[ing] about sewing it properly" with "a female convict … in a prison workshop … sewing, thinking too, about sewing properly, for she is afraid of being punished…. The whole social problem consists in making the workers pass from one to the other of these two occupational extremes." (Ibid., 94-5.)

Weil was not ignorant of the radical social transformations[16] that would be required to make work for all people meaningful in these ways.[17] Yet, she was adamant that "Nothing in the world can make up for the loss of joy in one's work," (2002, 81) and she proclaimed "the creation of a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work" to be the particular mission, or vocation [of] our age." (Ibid., 95.) In this regard, the fact that many girls in the Western world today are preparing to enter the workforce, even at professional levels, doesn't necessarily mean that they are freer.

Learning to work meaningfully in all aspects of life is the most general objective of any kind of education, and a feminist philosophy of education will establish this objective, without reducing it to preparation for employment. With regard to employment, such a philosophy must call for a radical critique of the economic values that underlie so much of modern society. Education must not seek to enable successive generations to make the most of the status quo, but to see the status quo in terms of forces to be contended with in the struggle for a life characterized by many kinds of personal, social and environmental value. A feminist philosophy of education must also incorporate criteria for meaningful work, such as those above, in its articulation of both the ends and the means of education. A student is a worker in every sense addressed by the criteria above, and the same kinds of criteria must be attended to, to make the student's work safe, interesting, challenging, largely self-directed, and closely affiliated with other aspects of personal and social life.

With regard to this reconceptualization of work, Philosophy for Children has much to offer, as well as much

to benefit from. Reflection on the meaningfulness of our experiences—including our experiences of work—and the reconstruction of relevant concepts and values, while not sufficient to transform future experiences of work, are necessary, and are the *modus operandi* of Philosophy for Children. How a new philosophical judgment might be tested in experience and what difference it could or should make in the lives of those who have reached it are questions that are not emphasized in most Philosophy for Children materials and methods, but are integral to the purpose of reordering experience. Deliberation on the practical consequences of philosophical judgments and experimentation with those judgments in non-dialogical contexts would only enhance the quality and the integrity of the philosophical inquiry, and would make the pedagogy more congruent with the feminist philosophy of education contemplated here.

Method

Weil addressed the concept of method in relation to one or more of the inter-related concepts of force, the good, work, and personhood. It is the entailment of those concepts that justifies Weil's statements to the effect that employing method can stand as a sufficient criterion for selfhood:

> What marks off the self? It is a method. When we really employ method, we begin to exist…. In action that has a method about it, we ourselves act because what is unforeseen presents itself to us…. Reality is not something open to proof, it is something established. It is when I employ method that I really begin to exist. Most people hardly ever realize this, because actions which proceed from reasoning are rare. (1978b, 73.)

This passage is significant in the way that it relates together action, reason, method and reality. Although Weil made frequent reference to a supernatural realm of unchanging, absolute good, she described the natural world as one of change and possibility, and therefore of agency. The kinds and amounts of good to be had in this world are determined by means of methodical work, rather than predetermined before our intervention. Furthermore, Weil asserted that spiritual matters, including "points of intersection between this world and the next," were dependent on methods more rigorous and precise than the methods of scientific inquiry. (2002, 187.)

One of the most important types of method, for Weil, was thinking, especially as reasoning. In a work called *Sur la Science*, Weil writes that, "reason seizes hold of the world [and enables us to] use the world insofar as it is an external obstacle in order to resist the world insofar as it is an interior enemy." (1952a, 527.) An important component of the method of thinking is freedom of opinion, which Weil included as one of only fourteen vital needs of the human soul, akin to the body's need for food. (Ibid., 23.) Two other vital needs of the soul she named point in opposite directions, yet both are necessary for thinking: security and risk. "Security means that the soul is not under the weight of fear or terror, except as the result of an accidental conjunction of circumstances and for brief and exceptional periods." On the other hand,

> The protection of mankind from fear and terror doesn't imply the abolition of risk; it implies, on the contrary, the permanent presence of a certain amount of risk in all aspects of social life …. The absence of risk produces a type of boredom which paralyses in a different way from fear, but almost as much…. Risk is a form of danger which provokes a deliberate reaction; that is to say, it doesn't go beyond the soul's resources to the point of crushing the soul beneath a load of fear. (Ibid., p. 33.)

Weil expands her theory of action as a method of inquiry by means of the notions of execution and transposition. Transposition means the expression or enactment of an idea taken as truth in a different context of experience from that in which it originated, and Weil takes successful transposition as a criterion of truth: "A truth which cannot be transposed isn't a truth; in the same way that what doesn't change in appearance according to the point of view isn't a real object, but a deceptive representation of such. In the mind, too, there is three-dimensional space." (2002, 80.) Dialogue is one method of transposition, but would not count as execution. Successful execution of a theory or judgment, "is a sufficient empirical proof of the possible; [whereas] for the impossible, there is no empirical proof, and a [logical] demonstration is necessary." (Ibid., 69-70.) Further, with regard to action as a method of inquiry, Weil asserts that,

> A degree of reality superior even to that of action is attained by the organization which co-ordinates actions, when such an organization has not been formed artificially, but has grown up like a plant in the midst of day-to-day necessities, having at the same time been moulded with patient vigilance and with some particular good clearly kept in view. This constitutes, perhaps, the highest possible degree of reality. (Ibid., 212.)

Collaborative and coordinated action as a method of inquiry brings Weil's epistemology to overlap with her political and social theory.

Weil's Platonic conception of the unity of truth, beauty and goodness led her to criticize the idea of value-

neutrality in inquiry,[18] in which she anticipated some of our contemporary feminist philosophers of science. Weil argued, to the contrary, that attachment to goodness is a necessary condition for inquiry that aims at truth, and she warned against the dangers of pursuing scientific and technological knowledge without regard for moral consequences.

> The spirit of truth can dwell in science on condition that the motive prompting the savant is the love of the object which forms the stuff of his investigations. That object is the universe in which we live. What can we find to love about it, if it isn't its beauty? The true definition of science is this: the study of the beauty of the world. (Ibid., 258.)

Weil observed that, "Free children are children whose every action proceeds from a preliminary judgment concerning the end which they set themselves and the sequence of means suitable for attaining their ends." (1978a, 84.) A feminist philosophy of education will take into account the relationship of method to personhood, and prepare children of each succeeding generation in the most current methods of inquiry within each of Weil's categories: technical, valuational, and theoretical. It will provide for education in methods of thinking, action, and collaboration, and for the environments of security and risk that make these methods possible. Finally, it will not perpetuate the modern divorce of inquiry into facts from inquiry into values, or the privileging of the former, but will find ways to reconcile the two as equally important and methodologically interdependent.

Philosophy for Children is not focused primarily on technical, or means-ends inquiry, though that sometimes emerges within the other two categories of inquiry, on which the movement *is* primarily focused: valuational and theoretical. Themes of valuation including ethics, aesthetics, social relationships and politics run through the IAPC curriculum and most other Philosophy for Children curriculum at every age level. When given the opportunity, children are prone to engaging with these themes in ways that combine seriousness, intensity, and play. Inviting a young girl to practice effective methods for making judgments about what to believe, what to feel, what to make and what to do is the only way to help her discover herself as a person both responsible for, and capable of managing her own beliefs, feelings and work.

Time

However proficient human communities become in methods of value-oriented inquiry, our powers are limited by a number of forces over which we have no control. One of those forces is time:

> We are truly flesh and blood and we are obliged to journey painfully through time, minute in and minute out. The travail is our lot and the monotony involved in all work is but one form it assumes. (Weil 1976, 380.)

Our most meaningful experiences of time have to do, not with its measurement but with changes in ourselves and our world. Indeed, the experience of time as change is one of the elemental human experiences that transcends culture, though we may interpret and respond to that experience differently. All selves are tensed, both male selves and female selves. Weil wrote, "I exist in time that is always outside of myself. I am no longer what I have just been. I am not yet what I am going to be. Nevertheless, what I was, and what I will be is still me." (1929, 2.)

Time is responsible for our passing youth, our inevitable loss of vitality, our lack of drive to change and grow, and, inevitably, our death. In an important sense, it is "time that does us violence." (Ibid.) And yet, cultural forces define the experience of aging differently for women and men. It is no coincidence that women are the majority consumers of anti-aging creams, diet pills, spa regimens and reconstructive surgery. For centuries women's identities have been more closely associated with their bodies and their sexuality

than have the identities of men with theirs. The result is that women have tended to experience aging with more apprehension and regret, and with less dignity than have men.

To understand how time affects our identity is to come to a realization that we are not fully in control of our own futures. But a thoroughly negative conception of time is debilitating; it is one of the internal forces that deter women from realizing freedom. Weil believed that "to escape from time, that is a sin," (Ibid., 3) and even that "all sins are an attempt to escape time." (1970, 102.) Those of us who no longer think in terms of sin yet recognize human tendencies to contribute to our own suffering by living in the past, fantasizing, or succumbing to regret, inertia, substance abuse, etc.

> Sin begins to show itself in terms of time, for example, license = immediacy. Intoxication – a state of passive suspension with regard to the near future or cowardice in the face of time: allowing time to flow by without resolution impinging on a moment of it. (1970, 42.)

Such "sins" are sins against our self-growth and they express themselves in self-deception, for growth is also a kind of change that depends on time.

The question remains: How are we to deal with time and death? Weil's answer: meaningful work. To work with a purpose and with care is to transcend the experience of being time's object, for "There is a certain relation to time which suits inert matter, and another sort of relation which suits thinking beings [and] it is a mistake to confuse the two." (2002, 60.) Thus, one moral import of time is our total impotence to bring anything into being without acting. It is the value of work that makes our attempts to escape from time sinful. Perhaps this is what Weil meant when she admonished us to, "make it so that time is a circle and not a line." (1929, 4.) Work is the means by which we taste of the relationship between the temporal and the eternal, and also the means by which we bring the eternal into the temporal. In Weil's words:

> My condition is such that I have only to conquer eternity in a certain way which does not consist in trying to traverse time, or to stop it, but in filling it with work, in establishing by work, between the project and the finished product, the link which cannot be given to me in any other way. (1929, 4.)

Nevertheless, in reflective action one is forced to make one's actions harmonious with the conditions that time imposes. One such condition is our relationship to history. For better and for worse, we and the world we inhabit are largely shaped by history. It follows that our meaningful work must take into account this temporal situation. As Weil cautioned,

> It would be useless to turn one's back on the past in order simply to concentrate on the future. It is a dangerous illusion to believe that such a thing is even possible…. [T]o be able to give, one has to possess; and we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated and created afresh by us. Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past. (2002, 51.)

Our material and cultural past constitute our most important resource for managing our present and future. But in order to be meaningful for us, historical materials and methods must be reconstructed. Women and men of the present must enter into a dialectic with our predecessors. "No other method exists for acquiring knowledge about the human heart than the study of history coupled with experience of life, in such a way that the two throw light upon each other." (Ibid., 229.)

Nor can the idea of history be separated from the idea of community, for as Weil observed, "A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future." (2002, 43.) We do not create the meaning we invest in our work and our lives *ex nihilo*, but in relation the ideas, values and practices we have learned in our communities. For this reason, Weil argued that,

> The degree of respect owing to human collectivities is a very high one, for several reasons. To start with, each is unique, and, if destroyed, cannot be replaced…. Secondly, because of its continuity, a collectivity is already moving forward into the future. It contains food, not only for the souls of the living, but also for the souls of beings yet unborn …. Lastly, due to this same continuity, a collectivity has its roots in the past. It constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living. Because of all of this, it may happen that the obligation towards a collectivity which is in danger reaches the point of entailing a total sacrifice. (Ibid., 8.)

Paradoxically, becoming an integrated self involves constructing meaningful relationships to both past and future that extend the self's very identity beyond the temporal life span. Only by affirming the fact that we must think and act within time can we overcome one of the strongest internal forces that bars us from creativity: the debilitating fear and

loathing of our own death. "The only remedy is consent to death and to the loss of all perishable possessions," Weil admonished (Ibid., 52). Such consent evolves out of our acting in meaningful work. "I must act and it is in the doing itself that I come to accept death and glimpse the me that I would like to be." (Ibid., 218.)

A feminist philosophy of education must acknowledge time as both a force to be contended with and a resource to be managed intelligently. It must call for education that prepares each new generation to take full advantage of the treasures of history, and to refine or abandon them when they find good reason to do so. It must help each generation to become full participants in the lives of their communities, and to work out their identities as individuals vis-à-vis their communities. It must enable the young to see their lives as projects of growth over time, whose identities are neither too stable nor too unstable to accommodate growth. Further, if educational processes are experienced only as *chronos*—as measured sequences or discreet "blocks" of time—and never as *kairos*—as having the quality of timeliness as well as the feeling of timelessness (being unaware of *chronos*)—there is something wrong with the processes.[19] A feminist philosophy of education will entitle children and teachers to use the experience of *kairos* as a criterion for evaluating their school experiences.

Time is a perennial philosophical concept, and one of the most popular in children's philosophical dialogue, because children continually wonder at their own experiences of time. Children know stories about their own past and stories from their cultural history. They experience changes in their bodies and they imagine themselves into divergent futures. They witness the economic value given to time in modern society. Above all, they know the oppression of time that moves too slowly and the timelessness of creative work. Philosophy for Children provides an important opportunity for children to begin to grapple with and make sense of these confusing experiences, and thereby, to begin to become subjects as well as objects of time. Further, the realization of *kairos* is an important regulative ideal for the community of philosophical inquiry. When philosophical inquiry is attempted as merely a logical exercise, when it deteriorates into a drawn-out conversation, when it is dominated by a few participants or dissipated in too many directions, it ceases to be meaningful and the participants feel the weight of each minute. Happily, most communities of philosophical inquiry have experienced the collective achievement of *kairos*, of intense engagement that feels like both work and play, from which the interruption of the bell—of *chronos*—is a rude awakening. These become hallmarks of experiencing time to be sought for in the future.

Conclusion

> I believe what I read.
> My judgments are what I read.
> I act according to what I read.
> Thus, the meaning of my acts
> Is dependent on what I read. (Weil 1946, 13.)

Only when a woman reads her daily experiences in terms of a self responding to the world does she discover both her power and the limits of her power. A feminist philosophy of education is not derived from predetermined truths, but fashioned from a dialectic between the experiences of women and men past and present. The work of Simone Weil draws our attention to a number of ideas that seem important to the continued liberation of women, through education. The end of such education is young women and men who are prepared to make an intelligent reckoning with the forces that beset them, to make sound judgments about what is possible and what is desirable, to engage in creative work that makes the desirable actual, and thereby to bring the kinds of value and meaning to their lives and the lives of their communities that fulfill time's potential.

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Endnotes

[1] "Catharine MacKinnon reminds us that 'we know things with our lives and we live that knowledge, beyond what any theory has yet theorized.' Making this theory is the challenge before us. For in its production lies the hope of our liberation, ... of naming all our pain ...." hooks, 75.

[2] T.S. Eliot wrote in his 1951 introduction to Weil´s *The Need for Roots* that Weil was "at the same time more truly a lover of order and hierarchy than most of those who call themselves Conservative, and more truly a lover of the people than most of those who call themselves Socialist." Weil 2002, X.

[3] "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in Weil 1973, 105-16.

[4] See "The refusal to use force finds it positive counterpart in the plentitude of love" in Weil 1970, 173.

[5] Weil proposed that special tribunals of judges of truth be convened to try perpetrators of falsehoods in public media, and that those found guilty be sentenced to prison. See Ibid.

[6] See Gregory 2004.

[7] Weil refers to obligations deriving from "an order of certainty very superior to that of formal [mathematical] proof." Weil 2002, 156.

[8] "For the proper object of love is goodness, and 'God alone is good'." Ibid., p. 132.

[9] "But for religious feeling to emanate from the spirit of truth, one should be absolutely prepared to abandon one's religion … if it should turn out to be anything other than the truth." Ibid., p. 247.

[10] "The absolute good is not only the very best good of all—it would then be a relative good—but the unique, total good, which comprises within itself in a superlative degree all forms of the good …." Ibid., p. 199.

[11] Weil summarized the needs of the soul under the terms Order, Liberty, Obedience, Responsibility, Equality, Hierarchism, Honor, Punishment, Freedom of Opinion, Security, Risk, Private and Collective Property, and Truth. Each of these terms is discussed in the first chapter of *The Need for Roots*, 2002.

[12] See Murdoch 1970, 67, and the section on moral education in Murdoch 1992.

[13] See Gregory 2006.

[14] This excerpt is from a letter from Weil to a female student.

[15] "Initiative and responsibility, to feel one is useful and even indispensable, are vital needs of the human soul." 2002, 15.

[16] Weil criticized modern industrial capitalism as "a machine of breaking hearts and crushing spirits, a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and laziness." 1978a, 105.

[17] "[S]uch a form of social existence would be neither capitalist nor socialist…. Its goal would be, not … the interest of the consumer—such an interest can only be a grossly material one—but Man's dignity in his work, which is a value of a spiritual order." 2002, 77.

[18] "Since the Renaissance … the very conception of science has been that of a branch of study whose object is placed beyond good and evil, especially beyond good …." 2002, 251.

[19] Eliot Deutsch writes about these different experiences of time and the relationship of creativity to *kairos*. 1992, 114-15.