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Abstract

Éric Weil presents one of the twentieth century's most innovative analyses of violence. According to Weil, violence cannot be sufficiently grasped as stemming from ignorance or from the weakness of will. Weil accepts that discourse reduces violence, but also claims that reasonable discourse cannot overcome radical violence. Individuals are always faced with a choice between submitting to the norms of discourse or refusing to be bound by normative behavior. Callicles provides a clear example of this problem. The individual can always extract themselves from reasonable discourse, either by refusing to speak or by choosing violence.

Keywords

Éric Weil; Callicles; Gorgias; Discourse; Violence; Argumentation

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Introduction

Plato's *Gorgias* is a complex dialogue. It speaks of rhetoric and the power of discourse, of justice, of the philosophical life, and its true subject could be said to be any or all of these things. Like many Platonic dialogues, the status of its subject (or subjects) is left open. However, what is the most surprising about this dialogue is the way in which it is left open. Throughout the course of the dialogue, Socrates discusses with three different interlocutors, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, each of whom holds a position more radical than the last. The dialogue is surprising because, even though Socrates seems at first to win the arguments, his adversaries' positions never quite seem to be refuted. Rather Gorgias' position is taken up and transformed by Polus just as Polus' position is taken up, transformed and radicalized by Callicles. Does this mean that Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles all hold the same position? This is uncertain. Gorgias speaks about rhetoric and is brought into a discussion concerning the moral destination of this "knack."¹ As Polus intervenes the question moves towards what is just and unjust and, finally, when Callicles takes Polus' place as Socrates' interlocutor, the subject seems to change again. The discussion moves to questions about the Good, the nature of power, the possibility of a naturalist reading of power, only for the discussion to come

¹ Socrates defines knacks at 462b-c and argues at 464b-466a that rhetoric is not an art, but the shadow of an art, namely that of legislation. Plato, *Gorgias*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, Complete Works (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997).

back around to rhetoric.² It may reasonably be argued that Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles at least partially see themselves as arguing for the same position, despite the differences of their topics, because Polus and Callicles both think they are saying what the previous interlocutor was too ashamed to defend in polite company.³ And even if they do not see themselves as arguing for a shared position, at the very least, Socrates can be said to be arguing from a unified position, one in which the philosophical life is synonymous with the Good and with the improvement of the city.⁴ Socrates' goal is to get his interlocutors to agree with this position, and though he seems successful in leading Gorgias and Polus into contradiction, it is unsure whether he convinces them. This uncertainty is underlined by the fact that Socrates' third interlocutor, Callicles, refuses to even accept Socrates' premises, and is thus not only never convinced, but also never refuted. In fact, Callicles only continues the dialogue at Gorgias' insistence and thus one can infer from his curt responses (often single replies of "yes" or "let it be so") that he only gets as far as he does because Gorgias has asked him to continue. He clearly sees dialogue with Socrates as not even being worth his time. Eventually even Gorgias' insistence no longer holds and Callicles extracts himself from the dialogue for good. In the face of dialogue's failure, all Socrates can do to bring his position out fully is to elaborate an eschatological myth as a monologue. However, even before the monologue, it is hard to call the interaction between Socrates and Callicles a true *dialogue*. Callicles only enters into it *because* he refuses Socrates' premises and hopes to show the superiority of his own position. In order to do so, he half-heartedly accepts some of Socrates' premises, but because he is not brought to change his position, he does not undergo the kind of transformative maieutic experience that Socrates' dialectical engagement is supposed to procure. One thus seems to be faced with two positions and two ways of life and because Callicles never truly accepts Socrates' premises as being potentially valid, the minimal agreement necessary to animate the dialogue is never truly present. In other words, Callicles never fully enters into dialogue and eventually withdraws himself from discourse entirely by refusing to speak. If philosophy can be considered the enterprise of a reasonable being that seeks unity and universality through discourse, the possibility that someone could willingly refuse discourse places the entire philosophical enterprise into question.

This problem is not limited to the *Gorgias*.⁵ In fact, according to Éric Weil (1904–1977), it is the problem that has accompanied the entire history of the western philosophical tradition.

² See Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Stauffer argues that these differences in fact belie Socrates' goal, which is to befriend Gorgias to elaborate a *true* rhetoric with him in order to benefit the city.

³ There is a large body of secondary literature on the place of shame in this dialogue, but one can get helpful overviews of the topic from the following articles: William H. Race, "Shame in Plato's *Gorgias*," *The Classical Journal* 74/ 3 (1979): 197–202; R. Bensen Cain, "Shame and Ambiguity in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 41/3 (2008): 212–37.

⁴ The fact that Socrates is arguing from a unified position is clear at the start of his discussion with Callicles, where at 481d he notes that he loves two things, Alcibiades and philosophy, and goes on to claim that the virtue of philosophy is that, unlike Alcibiades, it is not fickle. For Socrates "what philosophy says always stays the same." Plato, *Gorgias*, 482a. Concerning Socrates's argument that the role of the statesman is to improve the city and its citizens see *Ibid.*, 515b-d.

⁵ Within Plato's work it is also present at *Republic* 327c for example, Plato, *Republic*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A. Grube, Complete Works (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997). George Klosko even notes that "the repeated failure on the part of Socrates is taken by Plato to be the failure of philosophy itself" George Klosko, "The Insufficiency of Reason in Plato's *Gorgias*," *The Western Political Quarterly* 36/ 4 (1983): 582, <https://doi.org/10.2307/448587>. In fact, Klosko's reading of the *Gorgias* can be said to be very close to Weil's, specifically since both see the main problem of the *Gorgias* to be a political one. Klosko seems to say that the philosopher must have the means to force the

The existence and the identification of this possibility, of the possibility of refusing discourse, are at the center of Éric Weil's philosophical project, and despite the fact that Weil only mentions Callicles a handful of times throughout his work, he seems to see Callicles as a paradigmatic case of a specific type of refusal of discourse.⁶ In order to show why this is the case, this paper will give a general presentation of Éric Weil's philosophical position and the way he conceptualizes violence. Then, this paper will look at how Weil uses the figure of Callicles in light of his philosophical position. This will help us to better understand Weil's conclusion that in order to grasp philosophy philosophically, the refusal of discourse and the persistence of violence in discourse must be considered. In fact, for Weil, the ever-present possibility of the refusal of discourse requires seeing both the public political space and discourse itself as spaces of conflict. Seeing the problem in these terms, for Weil, implies a theory of political action and the development of a philosophical practice. This notion of the practice of philosophy will thus be seen as the main takeaway of this article and of reading Weil's philosophical project in this way.

I. Violence in Discourse

Erich Weil was born in Germany in 1904 and after his initial studies in medicine, he switched to philosophy and would go on to write his doctoral dissertation under Ernst Cassirer on the Italian renaissance philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi⁷ and to work with Cassirer at the Aby Warburg Library.⁸ This period was not to last long however. Weil, who was raised in a secular Jewish family, read and understood *Mein Kampf*. As soon as Hitler became Chancellor, Weil immigrated to France where he then became a naturalized French citizen (and became Éric Weil). When World War II broke out, Weil took a fake name, Henri Dubois, and joined the French army to fight against his former countrymen. Early in the war he was taken prisoner

people to listen, and thus he argues for something different than Weil. Weil recognizes that while force can be used on people, nothing guarantees that it will be successful. Furthermore, as soon as anyone uses force, they are no longer acting as a philosopher, rather they are themselves using the violence from which they had hoped philosophy would protect them. Nonetheless, what is shared is that both Weil and Klosko argue that Socrates and Callicles have two distinct sets of premises that are in opposition. For a full exposition of how Klosko reads Callicles' argument see George Klosko, "The Refutation of Callicles in Plato's 'Gorgias,'" *Greece & Rome* 31/ 2 (1984): 126–39.

⁶ To my knowledge the following is a complete list of Weil's mentions of Callicles: Éric Weil, *Logique de la philosophie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 1950); Éric Weil, "Politique et morale," *Cahiers de l'Institut de Science Économique Appliquée* 126/14 (June 1962): 3–15; Éric Weil, "Philosophie et réalité," *Bulletin de La Société Française de Philosophie* 57/4 (December 1963): 117–47; Éric Weil, "Science in Modern Culture, or the Meaning of Meaninglessness," *Daedalus* 94/ 1 (Winter 1965): 171–89; Éric Weil, "Sorge Um Die Philosophie - Sorge Der Philosophie," in *Die Zukunft Der Philosophie*, ed. Heinz Robert Schlette (Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1968), 222–38; Eric Weil, "Faudra-t-Il de Nouveau Parler de La Morale?," in *Savoir, faire, espérer: Les limites de la raison*, vol. I (Bruxelles: Publications des Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1976), 265–84; Éric Weil, "De la nature," in *Essai sur la Nature, l'histoire et la politique* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1999), 11–114; Éric Weil, "De la nature," in *Philosophie et réalité*, vol. I (Paris: Beauchesne, 2003), 343–63.

⁷ Published in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* in 1932 as *Die Philosophie des Pietro Pomponazzi* and in French in 1985 as *La philosophie de Pietro Pomponazzi* with a study on the Italian Neoplatonist philosopher Pico de la Mirandola that Weil used to acquire an equivalent for his German diploma after his immigration to France. Éric Weil, *La philosophie de Pietro Pomponazzi, Pic de la Mirandole et la critique de l'astrologie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1985).

⁸ For a portrait of Weil's time at the Warburg Library in Hamburg and for the intellectual environment surrounding the library see Édouard Mehl, "D'Aby Warburg à Éric Weil: le rêve d'une bibliothèque humaniste au 20^e siècle," *La Revue de la BNU* 12 (November 1, 2015): 60–69.

and spent the majority of the conflict in a prison camp. This experience radically altered Weil's philosophical fate and his faith in the rational tradition. The human possibility of violence became central to his philosophical reflection. For Weil, the individual always faces a choice which is, because it is free, unjustified and unjustifiable. This choice is between the universal and the particular, between reason and violence.⁹ This choice provides the first element of Weil's characterization of violence. For Weil, violence is the particular recognized in its particularity. However, the universality of discourse proves to be the means by which particularity is recognized. Discourse is thus both universal and particular, which is just another way of saying that the choice between reason and violence is made in a world that is shaped by both reason and violence. This world is partially reasonable, partially universalized, but insufficiently so because the violence of the particular resurges continuously.

It would be impossible in the space available here to go into the entire complex conceptual apparatus that Weil develops in order to understand the relationship between discourse and violence.¹⁰ Nonetheless, by focusing on certain aspects of the way that he characterizes violence, and the way this violence appears in the Greek city,¹¹ I will be able to show what is specific to Weil's understanding of the figure of Calicles. For Weil, violence is to be understood in all its dimensions, starting from what Weil calls *original violence*,¹² which is the violence of nature. This original violence is the violence that brings us face to face with our own smallness. It is the violence of the unchained forces of the world in which we find ourselves. It is the violence of disease and of natural phenomena. This original violence is extra-discursive insofar as its appearance is always the explosion of the particular into a world that has a discourse that claims to be universal. It can come from anywhere and when it appears, it undermines the very human work of making the world a human habitat. For Weil, the existence of an original violence helps to define the most basic role of human discourse. Discourse opposes itself to violence. In other words, the success of all human discourse depends on the extent to which it protects us from this original violence. Even our most modern discourses, for them to be effective, must first and foremost protect us from the natural violence of the world. However, natural violence is only seen as violence because it is brought into discourse. For Weil, this is the work of entire discursive communities and not of any single person. This is because the discourse that can grasp original violence conceptually and that can provide adequate cover from it only happens as the socially articulated discourse of a whole community.

⁹ For the full content of this choice as well as its arational character, see Éric Weil, *Logique de la philosophie*, 54-86.

¹⁰ There is a large and important body of secondary literature that does do so. For instance, see Marcelo Perine, *Philosophie et violence: Sens et intention de la philosophie d'Éric Weil*, trans. Jean-Michel Buée (Paris: Beauchesne, 1982); William Kluback, *Éric Weil: A Fresh Look at Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987); Gilbert Kirscher, *La philosophie d'Éric Weil* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 1989); Patrice Canivez, *Weil*, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1999); Mahamadé Savadogo, *Éric Weil et l'achèvement de La Philosophie Dans l'Action* (Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 2003); Luis Manuel Bernardo, *Linguagem e Discurso: Uma Hipótese Hermenêutica Sobre a Filosofia de Eric Weil* (Lisbon: Imrensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda, 2003); Francis Guibal, *Le sens de la réalité: Logique et existence selon Éric Weil* (Paris: Editions du Félin, 2011); Peter Gaitsch, *Eric Weils Logik Der Philosophie: Eine Phänomenologische Relektüre* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 2014).

¹¹ For two good collections of articles that deal with Weil's interaction with Greek philosophy see Jean Quillien, ed., *Cahiers Éric Weil*, vol. II (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1989). Patrice Canivez and Pierre-Jean Labarrière, eds., *Discours, violence et langage: Un socratisme d'Éric Weil* (Paris: Éditions Osiris, 1990).

¹² Éric Weil, *Philosophie politique* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 1956), 62.

The division of a community's discourse into multiple discourses is a later development. In other words, no single individual is the possessor of discourse, but each individual *participates* in a discourse that is public and (at least partially) universally available. For this reason, the community's discourse is not initially self-aware. In fact, for Weil, the failure of the Greek city-states to maintain a single unified discourse is what set the stage for the start of the western philosophical tradition. It is because of this loss of unity and proliferation of discourses that it becomes imperative to be able to choose which discourse speaks the truth, which discourse will allow violence to be reduced, and which holds together in the face of violence. Only once the community's discourse no longer sufficiently provides the stability it previously had does intra-discursive violence become evident. Before this, such violence was invisible. This implies that for Weil, within each community, at any given historic moment, there is a violence that is taken to be natural, whether it be slavery, gender inequality, class inequality, etc., because it has its place in that community's discourse. It is the conflict with other coherent positions (at this point, other communities) that draws out the contradictions that allow these diverse forms of violence to be seen as contingent and therefore as unacceptable. This in turn takes the form of a sentiment of injustice when faced with what is contingent in a discourse. The dissatisfaction with the contingent and arbitrary elements of the community's discourse is what pushes people to modify or reforge discourse itself. They must purify discourse from all the contingent violence that gives rise to the sentiment of injustice. In this way, it is the splintering of the community's unified discourse into a plurality of reasonable discourses that transforms the public political space into a space of conflicts where this plurality is constantly being drawn out and purified. This also means that there is a plurality of contradictions that define what people take to be sound premises and sound reasoning. In other words, there are different "logics" that are defined by different fundamental contradictions that shape discourse.

This movement from extra-discursive violence to intra-discursive violence provides the next important aspect of Weil's characterization of violence. Violence enters into discourse through what Patrice Canivez has called a "double reduction."¹³ The first reduction is the way that violence is subsumed under the rules of language in the form of contradiction. In this reduction of violence, the particularity of this or that phenomenon, or of this or that way of behaving is seen as unacceptable to discourse, and thus also as in contradiction with discourse itself. The second reduction is the internal reduction of the various contradictions within a discourse. It is always possible for a discourse to make concomitant claims that are in contradiction with each other. To universalize a discourse these concomitant claims must either be shown to be mutually acceptable, or certain claims must be prioritized at the expense of others. This is important because the internal reduction targets the contingent and contradictory positions inside the discourse itself. The elimination of these internal contradictions is what is supposed to lead to a *concrete* reduction of the violence that an individual is subject to inside the community. Whatever allows the concrete reduction of violence within the community is thus designated as *essential* and is taken to be *sacred* to the discursive community itself.

For Weil, the essential or the sacred is what allows a discourse to hold together. It is thus outside of critical examination. It is what grounds discourse because it is taken to be natural. In this reading, the history and the development of the community are filled with gods, rites, and values that are *sacred* because of the way they are seen to protect the community from violence. In its initial formulation, one community's sacred is seen as ontologically and metaphysically incompatible with all other *sacreds*. This plurality of *sacreds* articulated across multiple coherent discourses modifies the original violence of nature. Here, the particular is

¹³ Patrice Canivez, *Éric Weil ou la question du sens* (Paris: Ellipses, 1998), 6.

not some unforeseeable thing but rather something that is identifiable but unacceptable. We can identify that others live differently than we do, but at this stage of the community's evolution, we cannot accept it or even fully understand it. This unacceptable character leads to the possibility of violence between different human communities. Nonetheless, just like the original violence of nature, the violence between different human communities *is* initially seen as natural (and can always come to be seen as natural again). It is natural precisely because the opposition between the two sacreds is seen to be a natural opposition. This is the source of the external violence of different human communities. However, more problematic than this external violence is the violence inside the community itself. The community is supposed to share the same sacred. In fact, its discourse presupposes that all members indeed *do* share this same sacred and recognize the same essential. And yet, inside the community, violence can present itself in multiple ways. There is the violence that acts upon and through the community's different stratifications. This violence can present itself in the structural violence of inequalities, where the defense of these inequalities is made in the community's name, even though in reality, such a defense does little more than reinforce the particular advantages of particular groups. The violence inside the community can also manifest itself in the individual, whether through the gratuitous violence that is carried out for its own sake or through the violence that the individual inflicts on themselves (self-harm, drug abuse, etc.). According to Weil, discourse's historic role is to reduce and overcome violence. However, because he conceptualizes violence as the particularity within us that is unable to be universalized and that resists all universalization, the different forms of internal violence show the importance of a non-reductive articulation of this particularity. In other words, even though discourse seeks to reduce violence, it can only do so to a certain extent. Violence cannot be overcome once and for all, because individuals can always be unsatisfied with the form of discourse that, by merit of being *their* community's discursive shape, is presented to them as natural.

In fact, Weil reads the history of the western philosophical tradition as the history of the development of different discourses, each of which develops out of dissatisfaction with a dominant discourse. Each new discursive shape is supposed to ground a new discourse that overcomes violence, whether it be natural, social, moral, political, or personal. These discourses claim to grasp the real, nature, the individual, all in such a way that violence is not only reduced but overcome, and each discourse is supposed to be unique and total. Each new discourse is thus read as an attempt to give voice to some aspect of the human experience that the individual refuses to reduce to any previously available discourse. The welling forth of such new discourses highlights that no discourse is unique, nor total. Each is supposed to be universal in the sense that it provides the conceptual resources necessary for *every* individual to grasp themselves and to participate in this universal, but the resurgence of violence shows how partial this so-called universality is. Violence plays an essential role in explaining the movement of discourse from the implicit "natural" discourse that we find in the world (by being the member of a community, or a race, of a gender, etc.) and that shapes our naïve or pre-philosophical grasp of our own experience, to a discourse that explicitly claims to be a coherent grasp of the world and of experience as a whole. Weil interprets this transition as the movement from tradition to philosophy.

II. Weil's Interpretation of the Transition from Tradition to Philosophy

The transition starts as soon as the community, organized in such a way as to be protected from natural violence, submits to the social violence born from the common shared existence developed in the city. However, the possibility of the internal violence of the city, for Weil, exposes its members to the relapse into natural violence. In order to keep such a relapse from happening, individuals seek to conceptualize and universalize the particular. In this way, the

problem of violence appears for the first time. As Weil notes, the person faced with original violence, with pure violence, with the violence of nature, is not faced with the problem of violence, for them:

there is violence and [the individual] only has to defend themselves, the same as for a man dying of hunger, there is not the problem of hunger, but the problem of nourishment, and since he will not busy himself thinking of hunger and of defeating it in this way (unless he had prepared himself for such a situation before finding himself before the practical difficulty), nor ask himself how the human world needs to be arranged so that there is no longer the practical problem of hunger, he will look for a crust of bread or a bowl of rice.¹⁴

The problem of violence is the problem of how best to organize the world so that violence is no longer present. What the plurality of different discourses shows is that there is no longer a consensus about the things that are supposed to unite the city. People disagree with what is just and unjust. People disagree with the content of the community's science. People disagree about how the community should move forward, how those in the community should live, and even who should belong to the community. Up until this point, the tradition had guaranteed the consensus on these matters, but what this disagreement shows is that there is no longer any consensus about what is essential and inessential to the community. This is the problem of the *sacred* that was mentioned before, but transposed inside the community and not just between different conflictual communities. Weil reads Socrates as proposing a novel solution to this problem. Socrates realized that violence leads to the dissolution of the community, and he asks that, for the length of the discussion, individuals accept to follow discussion to its logical conclusions and that they rule out violence. He proposes reasoned argumentative dialogue as the means to lead all participants back to consensus. This is what I will call the meta-commitment to reasoned argumentative practices.

However, this form of Socratic dialogue actually did something else. In fact, because reasoned and reasonable argumentation draws out what is implicit and contradictory in our practices, such discussion, for Éric Weil, actually sped along the dissolution of the community that it was looking to reground. This is because, at this point of its development, the tradition lacked the reflexivity that discussion requires. This is the great tragedy of the Socratic figure, he looked to reground the community by finding non-contradictory definitions of its most sacred values, but because he brought more people to ask this question, he uncovered the community's instability and was condemned to death. However, he was only able to ask these questions because the community had already shown the need to reground itself. As such, philosophy "is born at a determined moment, in determined circumstances (regardless of whether it is a question of a single event or whether the streams flowing from diverse headwaters wind up meeting), and [...] is thus born as complete philosophy."¹⁵ In other words, philosophy is born from the confrontation of a *plurality* of reasonable positions that all claim to grasp a concrete situation coherently, and thus the individual (no matter their central discursive commitment) must deploy all these different positions in order to grasp the entire scope of their situation. Indeed, for Weil, "this need only exists at the historic moments where real contradictions have shattered a tradition" where no discourse "possesses that primacy that, at other moments, is their own."¹⁶ In other words, for Weil, "[p]hilosophical eras are eras of crisis (*κρίσις* = to discern) where the questions are as ambiguous as the

¹⁴ Éric Weil, *Logique de la philosophie*, 59. All translations unless otherwise noted are the author's.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 428.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 431.

responses,” and these crises are “those of the philosophical tradition and of all of life’s concrete meaning.”¹⁷ This, for Weil, creates a division between the tradition and philosophy, with philosophy explicitly asking the question of how to ground the community, to ground thought, understanding, etc. and where the tradition contents itself with its implicit grasp of such things. In this context, Weil sees Socrates as a transitional figure. While Socrates’ notion of discussion and dialogue is what will give way to philosophy, Weil interprets Socrates’ position as being political and not philosophical. What is the difference? Socrates was seeking a consensus, but did not himself provide the content of the consensus he sought. In other words, Socrates created the modern idea of philosophy by seeking a discourse that could become absolutely coherent by eliminating contradictions through dialogue. He gave us the model that the greater part of the western philosophical tradition was to follow, however, because he proposed no content, his criteria were purely formal and thus insufficient.

From our point of view, Socrates is right, but he is right because we are the heirs to his discourse, and we are looking at the question from the perspective of the western philosophical tradition, that is, from inside the meta-commitment to reasonable argumentative practices. However, this is exactly why the figure of Callicles poses a problem: he is not just Socrates’ adversary, he is our adversary insofar as we *are* Socrates’ heirs. Weil reminds us that “Philosophical discourse *per se est et per se concipitur*, but is so only once the choice of discourse is made and accepted: Socrates can at best reduce Callicles to silence, but he has no means of convincing Callicles that he should speak coherently, so as to not destroy, by what he says, the foundations of all coherent discourse and in order to not return to pure violence.”¹⁸ This is the core of Weil’s reading of the interaction between Socrates and Callicles. Philosophical discourse *per se est et per se concipitur*, in other words, it exists by itself and conceives of itself in its own progression, and it does so inside of discourse. However, violence can always irrupt into discourse and threaten it. This is what is meant by saying that the choice to participate in discourse is a free choice that exists outside of discourse. It is only understood long after it has been made. Weil’s great philosophical discovery is not to state this fact. Anyone can grasp philosophy’s impotence faced with a person who chooses violence. Weil’s great philosophical discovery is to have brought this fact into a philosophical discourse and to have built a philosophical discourse around this possibility. Weil *conceptualized* the persistent problem of how to grasp philosophy philosophically. For Weil, this is exactly what Plato could not grasp in his discourse. For Plato, the problem is how to appropriately ground discourse. In other words, Weil reads Socrates’ discourse as being formal because Socrates provides no content and he reads Plato as being the first person to establish a *philosophical* ground for philosophical discourse. In this way, Weil reads the difference between Socrates and Plato as a difference between the idea of a formally coherent discourse and the attempt to provide a concrete object for that discourse. This is the shape that classical ontology will take. According to this reading, Plato not only asks that discourse be coherent, he also demands that it agree with reality.¹⁹ Ideas thus, for Weil, play a discursive and argumentative role and not an ontological or metaphysical one. They are to be seen as explanatory primitives that serve as the conceptual ground for Plato’s discourse. However, and this is what is interesting about Weil’s analysis of the *Gorgias*, Callicles also presents a conceptual ground (whether it is called power or force or violence doesn’t matter) that is

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Weil, “Philosophie et réalité,” 128-129.

¹⁹ For the way that Weil reads both classical ontology and the Platonic position see *Logique de la philosophie*, 139-155.

supposed to ground his discourse.²⁰ It is precisely because two different grounds exist and because both are seen as absolute that the problem of violence presents itself. As Weil notes:

For Plato the essential questions centered on values or rather (to avoid the current confusion of values with things appreciated) on the question of *good* and *evil*. It was no secret for Plato that we make choices, that the world he lived in (and where we live as well) offers many “values”—ways of life, objects and situations that qualify as desirable or as detestable—and that the choice is free if we are prepared to take the consequences. But he saw at the same time that this world in which we make choices is not just the sum of disconnected data of fact and value, nor even of isolated and isolable value systems. Men are fighting over values, but not in a meaningless struggle; they do so in a living and meaningful history. And *if* they have decided, not so much in favor of *good* against *evil* as such, but in favor of declaring this thing *good* and that *bad*, they may come to terms, provided they want to do so. There is no demonstration that Socrates can use against Callicles in the *Gorgias*: he can only tell a myth and explain that Callicles, if he persists in his ways, will destroy human relations as well as all possibility of understanding the world.²¹

The kind of reasonable argumentative practices that Socrates presents cannot force Callicles to change his position. It can only show him what the consequences of that position are. In this way, Socrates seeks to show that Callicles’ “naturalism” is nothing more than a return to the original violence that discourse has taken us out of.²² What Callicles misses in his naturalist defense of strength is that this return would also take away all of the things that discourse provides. It would take away evaluative *criteria*, which thus means that it would also take away what is good and sacred and excellent about life. These things depend on evaluative criteria. Weil’s reading of Callicles hinges on the idea that Callicles finds Socrates’ demand for criteria illegitimate. In this way, Callicles both represents the tradition but also looks to radically alter it. As a representative of the tradition, Callicles takes the content of his attitude for granted. However, as a political actor, he is looking to transform the tradition by regrounding it on the notion of strength. Socrates’ complaint can thus be articulated as follows: Callicles presents a candidate, strength, to reground the tradition, but is unwilling to truly examine this candidate critically. This is because any critical engagement with the content of this strength would reveal everything that is contingent and arbitrary about it. Callicles is certain of his position, but his certainty remains pre-philosophical. Pre-philosophical certainty always suffers a problem: any alternative to it is seen as dangerous because of the way critical engagement destabilizes this certainty’s content.

As already noted, for Weil, Socrates’ major innovation is to have introduced the meta-commitment to reasonable behavior. This reasonable behavior takes the form of a non-violent argumentative practice that seeks to establish values. In other words, Socrates uncovered the need for an absolutely coherent discourse and uncovered, but did not solve, the need to ground such a discourse. Again, this is why Weil interprets Socrates’ fundamental position as not being philosophical but rather as being political. For Weil, Socrates’ discourse

²⁰ See Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 101-107. Irwin provides a clear reading of Callicles’ position.

²¹ Weil, “Science in Modern Culture, or the Meaning of Meaninglessness,” 187.

²² See Michèle Broze, “Calliclès et Thrasymaque: Sur la ruse et la violence chez Platon,” *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 9/ 1 (1991): 101. Broze argues that Callicles’ appeal to the Sophist division between *physis* and *nomos* is in fact only in order to ground his moral position concerning the naturalness of violence.

is characterized by the struggle to overcome the possibility of violence at the interior of the community. Weil interprets this discourse as being *political* insofar as it aims to reunite the community, to draw out all the contradictions that can put the unity of the community at risk. This is what explains the aporetic character of Socratic dialogues. It is also what separates Socrates from Plato. According to Weil, it was Socrates' inability to provide a content able to reground the community that would be what finally caused his death. He could put the community into question but he could not respond with any alternative. Plato seeks to understand what is real and what is behind the appearances of the world in order to provide that alternative. Weil states "the shock that determines Plato's entire life (and which made him go beyond discussion) takes place when he is forced to watch the community kill this man who was right."²³ Thus, precisely because what matters is providing content, Plato moved past a purely political discourse into an ontological discourse. Socrates' position and his deployment of the dialectic questioning (*elenchus*) presents the characteristics needed for reasonable discourse to take form (most notably by laying the groundwork for the classic laws of thought: identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle) but it is Plato who proposes a content, that of an objective (and object-based) ontological science. However, the Platonic position, for Weil, is not sufficient either. Weil will develop an argument for the reality of, and the need for, a plurality of discourses in order for reasonable discourse itself to be a possibility and as already mentioned, this argument starts from a world which is both reasonable and violent. The plurality of discourses is born, for Weil, from the diversity of concrete human attitudes and concrete interests that individuals can have, and Plato's attitude and his interests only make up one of these.

So, from the viewpoint of Weil's philosophical project, the discussion between Socrates and Calicles finds us at the junction of three separate positions, Socrates' proto-philosophical political discussion, Calicles' anti-philosophical naturalism, and Plato's philosophical science (here in the form of classical ontology). This junction is important. If the entry into reasonable discourse is marked by a choice, and if this choice is brought on by a sudden awareness of the contingency and arbitrariness of our own historically articulated concrete situation, then it is only because these positions exist together and simultaneously that we can choose. The choice that leads to discussion, to the argumentative practices that bring out the criteria needed in order to ground new traditions, in order to create new institutions, in order to find a new content, happens against the background of a tradition and Socrates, Calicles and Plato all draw from this tradition. We also draw from the tradition, but the difference is that from our modern viewpoint, we draw from a rich multitude of traditions. This plurality shows us that our content does not *necessarily* need to be grounded in classical ontology. If political discussion looks to reground the lost unity of the community, philosophical discussion looks to reground the truth that the lost certainty of our naive pre-philosophical position was supposed to hold. But as already noted, this certainty has only been lost because there is a plurality of different coherent reasonable positions.

So, does every new discourse do nothing other than establish a new certainty? Yes and no. What then for Weil is different about this new certainty? The difference is in the individual's relationship to it. For the individual who thinks through the problems of their situation, who seeks to eliminate what is contingent and unjust from their discourse, their new position, their new certainty will be a developed philosophical certainty. It will be a form of mature certainty, which is made up of an awareness of the path taken to reach this new certainty. In this way, mature certainty is aware that it has been mistaken in the past and that it may be mistaken again in the future, but it has developed the critical tools necessary to overcome these problems when faced with them. It is able to continue to search for truth in

²³ Weil, *Logique de la philosophie*, 130.

good conscience. The key is that this new certainty, because it seeks to find an appropriate ground for a concrete historic situation, always passes through discussion. This, however, does not mean that it is grounded once and for all, nor that there is a linear progress of some kind of immanent reason. In fact, for Weil, whatever immanence is to be found in reason is purely discursive and not metaphysical or ontological. In other words, the different possible grounds are best thought of as pragmatic commitments where the work of philosophy is to make the different consequences of these grounds explicit in a coherent discourse. This, however, also means that any immanence in discourse holds only as long as the individual chooses their specific discursive commitment and only as long as they continue the work of excavating all the commitment's consequences. Nonetheless, at any point, any individual can refuse the kind of serious argumentative practices that target the modification of discursive commitments by reforging them. This is, at the end of the day, why Callicles matters. He shows the limit of discursive practices and how they come to an end.

Even though Weil reads the systematic position that can be drawn out Plato's work to be the paradigmatic example of classical ontology, he reads Plato's philosophical practice differently. Indeed, he sees Plato's philosophical practice as accomplishing two separate feats. The first is the way in which the Platonic dialogues mobilize all the shapes of coherent discourse and the second is the way in which Plato also in a certain sense exemplifies the philosophical attitude of *political action*. For Weil, political action is understood as the activity of the individual who seeks to transform the world in order to make the universal effective. Weil sees this philosophical form of political action as the highest (most universal) goal the individual can give to themselves. This goal expresses itself as the collective project to universalize the world through argumentative practices that act on others. Weil reads this goal as being fundamentally present (though implicit) in Plato.²⁴ In the first sense of understanding Weil's reading of the Platonic practice of philosophy, we can indeed look at the *Gorgias* as an excellent example. In it, Plato stages an interaction between different philosophical positions, leaving the conflict unresolved. As readers, we are invited to examine these different positions in their most robust forms and to thus decide for ourselves where we stand. However what matters is that this decision is no longer made naïvely. We understand that we are making a choice between positions and that there are people who genuinely hold these positions. This is what is meant by Weil's insistence that philosophy be pluralist. Reasonable options are a necessary part of thinking. This does not mean that every option will be equally valid in every situation. Rather it means that these are real possibilities that people *may* choose.

The second way that Weil reads Plato's philosophical practice is in the development of political action. He notes that the initial agreement that Plato could hope for was insufficient precisely because of the limits of explicit discursive shapes that were available to the Greek *polis*. He writes, "Politics merely aims in this state (or in this State) at the domination that liberates the individual from violence through individual violence, political philosophy only targets the agreement of free men in the discourse of the *object* that puts an end to *discussion*: Callicles is no less (nor more) right than Socrates, and the one's 'realism' is as justified as the other's 'myth.'" ²⁵ Whatever Plato himself thought, his dialogues show that he was unable to find a scientific resolution to philosophical problems. And Weil even thinks that Plato's development shows that he moves past the classical ontological position he in large part created towards a notion of *political action*. Weil states,

in (and for) Plato, the limitation of the Greek State splinters at the sight of [...] [the above-mentioned] opposition; it is not by chance or by personal taste

²⁴ Ibid., 411-412.

²⁵ Ibid., 411.

that he sought a real role in the history of his time and that his last work is a code of “applicable” laws (in the discussion of these roles neither Callicles nor Socrates play any role): it is a matter of shaping reality, of transforming the world, because it is through the transformation of the world that man is transformed.²⁶

Thus, Plato moved towards political action even if he was unable to fully articulate it as an explicit position. Weil does not consider this a failure, rather he thinks that it is normal. Philosophy tends towards action, and it is in part Plato that put philosophy on this path, even if he was unable to grasp it fully.

In Plato’s case, this path starts from his choice of ground (the Forms insofar as they are ontological objects). The contemplation of the Forms is thus seen as a way to guarantee the political unity that *political action* aims at. In other words, it is supposed to eliminate violence.²⁷ However, for Weil, the limit of the Platonic discourse is that it does not understand itself in these terms. This is where the problem with the Callicles comes to the fore. The fact that the dialogue in the *Gorgias* tapers off, only to end in a monologue, shows the way that the opposition between political action and philosophical thought is neither resolved nor can be resolved by Plato. This is not to say that Weil resolves this opposition once and for all. He does not, violence still exists (and for Weil, it always will as long as human beings are discursive, that is, free, things) and the political problem of how to best organize our society is still present. However, he does identify the problem and thus provides a universalizable discourse that grasps its own role in the modification of our human social reality. This allows Weil to characterize what can be called the “philosophical good conscience.”²⁸ Plato struggles with the difficulty of grounding philosophical necessity and if we are to believe George Klosko’s reading of the *Gorgias*, Socrates’ discussion with Callicles is representative of Plato’s loss of faith in philosophy.²⁹ When violence is a consequence of error or of weakness of will, philosophy is able to retain its claim to necessity and to guaranteeing the existence of reason in the world. However, Callicles neither misunderstands what Socrates is trying to do, as is clear when he notes that Socrates constantly shifts discussion from one level of analysis to another,³⁰ nor does he demonstrate any weakness of will. In fact, it can reasonably be argued that he is being incredibly willful or at least mule-headedly stubborn in his refusal to accept Socrates’ premises and to see Socrates’ arguments against his position as valid. Callicles seems to knowingly withdraw himself from discourse and it is this knowing withdrawal that interests Weil.

III. The Structure of the Refusal of Discourse

Within the structure of Weil’s work, there are two key refusals of discourse. One is the refusal to enter into discussion, and the second is the refusal to remain in discussion, to keep talking until all parties are satisfied that they have gotten to the bottom of things. However, they are tied up together. When one refuses to enter into discourse, it is because they want to insulate their position from any critique. When one refuses to stay in discourse, it is to longer be held to the normative constraints that discourse demands: it is the choice to knowingly refuse the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 132-133.

²⁸ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁹ Klosko, “The Insufficiency of Reason in Plato’s *Gorgias*.”

³⁰ At 483a, Callicles states “this is in fact a clever trick you’ve thought of, with which you work mischief in your discussions: if a person makes as statement in terms of law, you slyly question him in terms of nature; if a person makes a statement in term of nature, you question him in terms of law.” Plato, *Gorgias*.

meta-commitment to argumentative practices. The meta-commitment to reasonable discourse grounds philosophy and is even in a sense synonymous with philosophy. Nonetheless, even at the birth of this meta-commitment as a fully articulated position,³¹ its greatest champion, Plato, could not ignore its instability. Plato recognizes the problem, but he was unable to provide a solution to it. This is, for Weil, the importance of Callicles. He shows that even at the source of western philosophy the problem is present. This problem can be summarized as follows: the normative constraints of discourse are necessary, but only for those that submit themselves freely to these constraints. We may argue (and it has often been argued) that the discourse of modern experimental science (or its philosophical relatives, scientism and positivism) cannot be argued with, that if you disregard good science the world will catch up with you. According to this argument, if you disregard what science says about disease, you expose yourself to it. Ignore what science says about gravity and you fall, and so on. However, nothing forces anybody to choose life over death. In fact, there will always be ideas that have such a hold over people that they are willing to die instead of to submit to some other one. This is what the slogan “live free or die” means, but it says nothing about what we are living freely for. What I propose then is that Callicles should be understood in Weil’s work as a shorthand for the refusal of discourse. As a shorthand, the mention of Callicles allows Weil to mobilize the concept of the refusal of discourse without rehearsing all of the arguments over and over again. This is because Callicles presents a particularly clear case of how discourse comes to an end. However, for all of his value as a shorthand, he does not encapsulate the breakdown of reasonable argumentative practices in their totality. In fact, as a shorthand, he may even flatten some of its aspects, because he is not representative of the refusal of the discourse’s most radical form: the violent refusal (or destruction) of all discourse and all normative constraints.

Callicles refuses to speak because he refuses to accept placing his own position under Socrates’ reasoned critique, a reasoned critique that would lead him to see the incoherencies that haunt his position. This refusal is, however, only one part of the refusal that Weil theorizes and that guides his interpretation of violence. The fuller understanding demands asking how our pre-philosophical certainty guides our violent refusal of discourse. For Weil, what is particular about our pre-philosophical certainty is the way that we work to defend it. It plays this role because anybody can refuse to enter into discursive practices to shelter their own position from critique (and thus from modification). Weil sees discursive practices as a shared, social endeavor. One of the consequences of such a viewpoint on discursive practices is that *no* discursive position is complete. Every person will hold a discursive position that has arbitrary and contingent content and that can be further universalized. Because of this, one of the key moves to universalizing discourse is the meta-commitment to reasonable behavior understood as argumentative practices. Without this meta-commitment, the individual remains enclosed in a determined discourse because they do not put their content under critical examination. However, being able to refuse or refute determined positions is a key criterion for being able to move from naïve (or pre-philosophical) certainty to mature (philosophical) certainty. One has to know what they refuse and why to reach a certainty that is able to understand the history of its own emergence.³² This, for Weil, is one of the reasons that mature certainty is so hard to reach and also why reasonable discursive practices breakdown so often. One is constantly sifting through reasonable possibilities in order to choose in real concrete situations. In such cases, it is easy to allow an already elaborated coherent discourse to take on the responsibility of choosing. Doing so, however, always opens

³¹ In this reading, the meta-commitment to reasonable nonviolent argumentative practices is in fact what Socrates truly midwifed into the world.

³² Weil, *Logique de la philosophie*, 429.

the door to violence. In other words, anyone can, at any moment, choose to refuse all of the normative constraints of discourse in order to let their particularity move them even when faced with the universal.

Conclusion

Éric Weil presents a novel way of understanding violence in relation to discursive practices. First, violence is seen as the motor of the development of our conceptual content. This is both because he sees reducing violence to be the most basic role of discourse and because violence provides each concrete discourse with the specific content that it addresses. Next, Weil provides us with a way of grasping the limit of that reduction. By conceptualizing violence in terms of particularity, specifically as particularity recognized as particular, we are in a position to understand why violence can never be eliminated. Any individual can decide to no longer respond to normative constraints. In other words, anybody can live outside of reasoned and reasonable argumentative practices, because anyone can choose violence. However, this only appears as a choice from inside of these argumentative practices themselves. This position goes against a large part of the philosophical tradition, which reduces violence to error or weakness of will. For Weil, violence can only be seen that way from inside of discourse, but the very opposition that Weil seeks to understand is not between truth and error inside of discourse. It is between violence and discourse, between the particular and the universal. This again is what is important about the figure of Callicles in Weil's philosophy. Callicles reminds us that this radical possibility was already recognized, though not fully and explicitly grasped, at the very start of the western philosophical tradition. In Weil's own writings, Callicles thus becomes a shorthand for the radical nature of this problem, he is a figure that has walked with the philosophical tradition every step of the way. In the context of the *Gorgias*, the discussion between Socrates and Callicles is left unresolved, but in our context, thanks to Weil, we understand that there can be no resolution unless all parties agree to follow through with argumentative practices and to only use such practices when modifying our human social reality. This means that each party has to, for themselves, take on the meta-commitment to nonviolent argumentative practices. In other words, they must, at least hypothetically, accept their adversary's premises, and continue to accept them until they can show why they are erroneous or in some way less universalizable than their own. There is nothing that guarantees that this will happen, and there are even numerous material conditions that make this possibility difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, if we want to be reasonable for ourselves, that is, if we want to refuse meaninglessness and refuse to abandon the philosophical project and the philosophical life, we must give this project to ourselves. In other words, according to Weil, we adopt a philosophical practice that looks to reasonably modify the world in such a way that reasoned argumentative practices are effective. By characterizing both violence and reason as a-reasonable choices, Weil shows that no *argument* can force anyone to become sensitive to arguments and that anyone can choose violence. However, and more importantly, this also means that philosophy has no need to justify itself. As long as one chooses reasoned argumentative practices, as long as one chooses the universal, there is no argument and no *force* that can convince them otherwise. In this way, both Callicles and Socrates are obstinately fixed in their position. The difference, then, is that the philosophical position is capable of making this fact explicit. While this difference may seem slight, for those who seek to practice philosophy in good conscience, it is the difference that makes all the difference.

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