BIN LADEN AND THE GREAT BEAST:
A REVIEW OF E. JANE DOERING’S SIMONE WEIL AND THE SPECTER OF SELF-PERPETUATING FORCE

Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force
E. Jane Doering


Shortly after Osama bin Laden was killed by American SEALs in Pakistan, Jonathan Haidt published an opinion in the New York Times entitled, “Why We Celebrate a Killing.” Professor Haidt notes there that, although most Americans agreed that bin Laden’s demise was “a good thing,” many were disturbed by the public “revelry” that followed. Wasn’t the spectacle “a celebration of death and vengeance, not justice”? he asks. Didn’t it “lower us to ‘their’ level?” “No,” he answers.

Haidt’s chief argument for his conclusion is taken from evolutionary psychology: morality at “the individual level” is not to be confused with what can and should obtain within “groups and nations.” When individuals compete, natural selection rewards “selfishness,” Haidt informs us, but when collectives compete, that same selection favors groups that can engender internal “unity” and “cooperation.” Bees are adept at this, and human beings are also “able to become, briefly, hive creatures.” Appealing to Emile Durkheim, Haidt maintains that “collective emotions” can “dissolve the petty, small-minded self” and “make people feel that they are part of something larger and more important than themselves.” Such “collective effervescence” (Durkheim’s phrase) was what was going on after bin Laden was killed, according to Haidt, and it was “good and healthy.”

Haidt is well-aware that some consider such solidarity an ugly and menacing form of tribalism. He explicitly asks, “When celebrants chanted ‘U.S.A.! U.S.A.!’ and sang ‘God Bless America,’ were they not displaying a hateful ‘us versus them’ mindset?” His emphatic answer: “Once again,
no.” We must draw another distinction, he tells us. “Nationalism” correlates with racism and hostility to other countries, but “patriotism” reflects a proper “love of one’s own country.” Nationalism fosters a quest to be “dominant” over others, while patriotism can be an “altruistic” bondedness with one’s fellow citizens. Once one recognizes this difference, one can appreciate the “communal joy” that followed, at least temporarily, America’s “bravely and decisively” achieving its goal of terminating a murderous threat. Thus far, Haidt.

In the balance of this essay, I explain why I consider Professor Haidt’s thought-provoking piece gravely misleading. My critique puts Haidt in conversation with Simone Weil, drawing extensively on E. Jane Doering’s *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*. In this way, I hope both to think through a crucial social issue and to offer a review of an important new book.

As I have suggested, Haidt makes much of the Durkheimian notion that the human species is *Homo duplex*, “two-level man.” Individuals need to forge personally satisfying relationships with other individuals, but they also need to be bound to larger and more anonymous moral communities. With religion increasingly waning across Europe, Durkheim looked to “collective emotions” for the natural glue requisite to meet the second challenge. Simone Weil’s analysis of “force” and its genesis in human nature and impact on human society leads her to a starkly contrasting position. She can be read as emphasizing that our species is, by inclination, *Homo duplicitas*, “mendacious man.” We do not merely manage our instincts at two levels; left to our own devices, we are inclined to dishonesty and manipulation in all dimensions of life. We are often self-deceived and other-duping, denying common vulnerabilities and afflicting others by turning them into objects to be exploited for our own egotistical or corporate purposes. Rather than extolling group sentiments as the solution to social fragmentation, Weil typically associates them with the mass proclivity to peck the weak to death. For her, “the collective is the object of all idolatry,” and she calls it “the Great Beast.”

For Weil, no natural inclination is sufficient to overcome the human cycle of domination and destruction, which she associates with “gravity.” We are in need of a “supernatural justice” in which the strong treat the weak as equals, which she associates with “grace.” Such grace is not explicable on evolutionary or any other temporal grounds. As she avers, “the (balanced) division of power between the strong and the weak is only possible through the intervention of a supernatural factor.”

In addition to *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*, the three key Weilan texts in this regard are “The Iliad or the Poem of Force,” “Reflections on War,” and “Some Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism.” The first of the three essays was published during Weil’s lifetime and is much discussed, while the latter two are in her collected works and remain comparatively unknown. Doering discusses all three with immense wisdom and erudition, often translating crucial passages herself. As Doering notes, Weil “wrote the article [on Hitlerism] precisely because she knew that it was human nature to admire the powerful and to want to share in collective glory” (90). We tend to admire technological efficiency and military might and to forget that such prowess has little or nothing to do with moral rightness.
Like Haidt, Weil recognizes the importance of shared history and communal cohesion, what she calls “the need for roots.” Her list of “the needs of the soul” includes “collective property” and “disciplined participation in a common task.” Weil also appreciates the occasional necessity of using violent force to protect innocent life and preserve essential values. (Doering carefully documents how the Frenchwoman came to reject pacifism.) Yet Weil is far less sanguine than Haidt that one can draw a sharp contrast between patriotism and nationalism, or between just and limited war (including assassination) and unjust and self-perpetuating force (including mob frenzy). She realizes that we all wish to lose ourselves in a large, impersonal reality, but when this reality is a temporal institution or assembly, it inevitably becomes idolatrous. For Weil, nothing finite—neither our own passions nor the nation state—can satisfy the human desire for transcendence. “At the centre of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world.” “Man would like to be an egoist and cannot.”

To repeat, Weil grants the importance of temporal traditions and social loyalties, but these must be constantly scrutinized and balanced. Above all, they are not to be absolutized. As Doering observes, “[Weil] lamented that because of the contemporary loss of traditional contexts for one’s obedience—the family, the workplace, and the local culture—unconditional allegiance gravitated by default to the state, which in the long run diminished individual freedom” (93).

There is no need to deny a theoretical difference between individuals and groups or between patriotism and nationalism, but these distinctions are blurred in reality. Human thought and action are often, if not always, practically ambiguous. As Weil constantly reminds us, we are personally and politically moved by both love and force. No doubt, some of the revelers after bin Ladin’s killing were motivated largely by patriotism and a sense of justice; equally indubitably, however, some were fully glorying in death and vengeance. The majority—and I would include myself in this—oscillated somewhere in between. Such is the ambivalence of the human heart: it is pulled simultaneously toward civility and cruelty, compassion and Schadenfreude. When we are not honest about and on guard against this, abomination happens. For example, some of those fighting for Nazi Germany in WWII were animated by love of country and a sense of duty, while others were committed anti-Semites who affirmed the ongoing genocide. But the majority of Germans were too oblivious to their own half-hearted complicity in hatred to check the slaughter. If Weil is right, this double-mindedness is a universal human disposition.

This is not to say that Haidt is obtuse or has fascist sympathies. He is an impressive scholar and a civilized man, but he is not a civilizing influence. He is too wary of mass humanity to be a wise, much less a prophetic, voice. He does not take seriously enough the tendency of violence to contaminate even those who are seeking justice, nor does he sufficiently sympathize with the (possibly unintended) victims of violence. I do not contest the need to “go after Osama”; condign punishment and deterrence of future terrorism have their place. Weil would insist, however, that, at best, bin Laden’s death was a necessary means to the combating of brutality, rather than a good end to be celebrated. There is a fine line indeed between retributive justice and vengeful will to power. (This is especially true in the era of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, where suspected terrorists were humiliated and denied basic human rights.) But Haidt blurs this line. Moreover, he does not even
mention the fact that, in addition to bin Laden, the American raiders killed bin Laden’s son, bin Laden’s courier, a male relative of the courier, and the courier’s wife. One can debate whether the unarmed bin Laden should have been shot on sight or captured and brought to trial—I would have favored the latter, as does traditional just war theory—but the killing of noncombatants like the son and wife is a different matter. If intentional, such killing is always to be forbidden; if unintentional, it is always to be lamented. When we Americans figuratively danced on Osama’s watery grave, we inured ourselves to the “collateral deaths.” And even bin Laden himself, profoundly guilty and dangerous though he was, still bore the image of God. To deny or overlook this fact risks pandering to injustice.

Again, I do not consider Professor Haidt to be personally unjust, but, to use Weil’s term, he “(mis-)reads” our moral situation in a way that encourages others to be inattentive to evil. By Weil’s lights, he is too optimistic about naturalism and too pessimistic about supernaturalism. Evolution-as-natural-selection is his explanatory bottom line, and this rules out any reference to the divine. Competitive advantage, for individuals and groups, is the engine that drives history and limits moral ideals. Thus Haidt is insouciant about the inclination of groups to annihilate outsiders and anesthetize insiders, even as he seems skeptical of a self-sacrificial love for all human beings. In short, Haidt over-estimates what Weil calls “gravity” and under-estimates what she calls “grace.” He seems blind to both the Great Beast and God.

This is not to say that only a theist, much less only an explicit Christian, can be a just social critic. But any cultural commentator who encourages us to celebrate a killing based on natural selection and group solidarity owes it to his readers to explain how and where he or she draws the limits of proper force. It is a great merit of Doering’s volume that she helps us see the hazards of a fascination with force and a denial of transcendence. Via a careful reading of both published and posthumous essays, Doering highlights Weil’s wariness of the temptation to dehumanize others. Haidt, on the other hand, allows us to lower our guard. He is silent where he should speak up, and he endorses raucous display where we should be silent.

As the sole remaining super-power, America stands in roughly the same relation to the world as Rome did after it had vanquished Carthage. If America is to conduct a just war against terror, if it is to have a post-Cold War conscience that prevents another imperial fall, Darwin and Durkheim are not enough. We need Doering’s Weil. Simone Weil does not despair over humanity’s fallibility but turns our attention to God’s perfection, while Jonathan Haidt can only encourage us to buzz with the hive. The latter is imprudent, even dangerous, but above all it reflects an inadequate view of reality. Or so we Weilans believe, and so E. Jane Doering’s readers can now more readily understand.

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Notes


