

**Love for God's Necessity: the ambiguity of Simone Weil's *hupomone***

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## Acknowledgements

‘Par ma seule façon d’écrire, je vais me dévoiler tout entier,  
et si je ne suis pas sincère – c’est-à-dire sans aucune pudeur –  
j’aurai perdu mon temps à gâcher du papier.’

Marcel Pagnol, *La gloire de mon père*.

It is strange how one can get the feeling of knowing and loving someone just by reading her works. This is quite ironical if the same writer asserts that all beauty is anonymous. The writings of Simone Weil reflect a beauty that is far from being impersonal but on the contrary, they reveal the uniqueness of her soul. I am grateful that she once was and hope that she still is. This thesis was much more than an academic obligation. I experienced great joy as well as sadness and acquired new insights. It is also the product of my own past and present, of my encounter with those who have suffered and suffer, with those who continue to live and love despite all kinds of tragedies and with those who have allowed hope to grow in their souls. All of them I need to thank but since they will most probably never read this, I can only be grateful for such poignant revelations of divine grace and love.

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## Introduction

Simone Weil (1909-1943) has been praised for her theological and philosophical insights, her compassion and her active solidarity with the oppressed. Some of her assertions have also aroused fierce critics. There has been relatively a lot written about her, interpretations of her thought as well as biographies, also in non-French speaking parts of the world. There are even associations devoted to her (intellectual legacy), such as the ‘Association pour l’étude de la pensée de S. Weil’ and the ‘American Weil society.’ In other words, Weil – her ‘person’ and her wide-ranged ideas – has fascinated and provoked many and still does. Her major works, except for a few articles in political magazines and reviews, were posthumously published and also translated in English (and other languages). The first one, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (*Gravity and Grace*) appeared in 1948. Since 1988, the Éditions Gallimard has started the project of an *Oeuvres Complètes*, intended to appear in sixteen volumes. Weil’s writings include political, historical, philosophical and religious works, poems, tragedies and translations from Sanskrit and Greek texts. Her literary style is just as diverse, ranging from letters, meditations to essays. In the present thesis, I have made use of the old French editions of Weil’s works, namely *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (1948), *L’Enracinement* (1949; *The Need for Roots*), *Attente de Dieu* (1950; *Waiting for God*), and *Cahiers* (I-III: 1951–56; *Notebooks*), *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (1957) and *Pensées Sans Ordre Concernant l’Amour de Dieu* (1962).<sup>1</sup> I have selected and restricted myself to the above works for their explicit philosophical and theological content. All translations from Simone Weil, in this thesis, are mine unless otherwise indicated.

It is Weil’s preoccupation with human suffering and evil in the world, which incited me to wish to study her writings. Peculiar to Weil is the thought that people are to be prepared for misfortune that can hit anyone at any time and in any place. ‘Misfortune’ is my translation of *malheur*, a key concept in her thought, while other English translations use ‘affliction’. My impression that ‘misfortune’ expresses more closely the notion of fate or chance is confirmed by her use of the term ‘*mauvaise fortune*’ (bad luck or ill fortune).<sup>2</sup> Misfortune deserves its name precisely because it is inflicted *blindly*, without regard for the vices and virtues of the one who is struck. The universe in which we live, according to Weil, is governed by an indifferent mechanism called necessity. Such a concept of suffering and evil excludes notions of just or deserved punishments, meanings of, or reasons for, suffering and evil. I was initially attracted

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<sup>1</sup> The last two books are compilations of reflections, fragments and letters. As far as I know, they have not been brought out in the same form in English.

<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), p. 173.

by Weil's stress on absolute intellectual probity and hence by her scepticism as well as her radical views. A concept that particularly seemed interesting was her *hupomone*, central enough in her writings to have incited Father Perrin to give the title '*Attente de Dieu*' to the collection of her letters and reflections. This attitude seemed to express her desire for intellectual probity while being the most effective one in the face of misfortune. Weil, indeed, wished to be a faithful enduring watch unto death, with the grace of God, like the blessed slaves, in Luke, whom the master finds awake and who bear fruits in wait (*en hupomone*).<sup>3</sup> The biblical passage to which Weil often refers is, 'You, be like men who wait for their lord, when he will return from a wedding, that when he will come and will knock, they may open unto him immediately. Blessed are those slaves, whom the lord when he comes will find awake. Verily, I say to you, he, he will gird himself, and them, he will make them recline in front of his table, and will come before them and serve them.'<sup>4</sup>

Weil was convinced that she had to remain in such an uncomfortable attitude – in her own words – in obedience to God, to the Christ who is the truth. Due to her stress on this immobility, which I interpreted as an expression of her intellectual probity, I assumed that Weil would restrict herself to a kind of 'negative theology' and 'negative philosophy'. In other words, I initially thought that her critical attitude would, above all things, negate and deconstruct truth-claims, for the sake of the truth. Yet, I was wrong, as it soon appeared and it is this realisation that has led to the title of my thesis. Her *hupomone*, at first sight, does not seem to differ from the biblical endurance or patience. To be *en hupomone*, as it is understood in Christianity, is to endure suffering and evil, in love, faith and the hope of redemption. The grace of God, in the forms of strength and consolation, and the mutual support of fellow-beings make this endurance possible. The very fact that Weil refers to biblical passages gives the impression that her *hupomone* has the same meaning. However, her concept of *hupomone*, as I will show, is based on the negation of the Christian hope and concept of redemption or salvation. Weil's *hupomone* is, indeed, dependent on particular views of man and God, which are quite rare in Christian theologies and doxologies.<sup>5</sup> Her ideas, however, can be found back in the writings of 'mystics', the so-called 'quietists' and various Buddhist and Hindu philosophies. In any case, I realised that Weil's *hupomone* was far from being an unequivocal, harmless concept since its

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre Concernant l'Amour de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 145. This is my translation of Weil's own translation from the Greek text. See Lk 12: 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> I use 'man' as a gender neutral noun, to refer to any human being, as Weil does in her writings. I also use 'He' to refer to God without implying that God is male.

moral implications – for man’s self-understanding and actions – are drastic. Her views of man and God are not exactly the results of any kind of epistemic scepticism.

Weil’s central claim is that the man who says to love God, truly does so if he loves the Necessity that constitutes the universal order. Indeed, she conceives Necessity as the perfectly obedient servant of God, nothing else than the will of God or the divine order that rules matter. The love for Necessity (the Stoic *fatum*) is facilitated through the *beauty* of the universe. The latter – matter without discernment and intention – is beautiful precisely because it can do nothing else than ‘letting’ itself be governed by Necessity. Hence, the beauty of the universe is the reflection of the wisdom of Necessity (and of the Master). The one who has the *amor fati* (literally: love of fate) is able to love events as they happen and does not wish that they were different, and is therefore able to see the beauty that the indifferent mechanism imprints in matter. The conception of the *amor fati* as inseparable from the love for God also implies that the atheist who is capable of the *amor fati* is very close to God, even if he does not think in these terms. Weil’s *hupomone* not only presumes the *amor fati* but goes even further by claiming that man needs to become as beautiful as the material universe. In other words, man has to become as obedient and passive as matter if he loves God. Obedience to necessity – natural or supernatural – is the love for God. My thesis is that Weil’s assertions about the ‘essence’ of God and the end of man are far from being self-evident and non-problematic. Hence, I question whether her *hupomone* should indeed be the attitude of the one who loves God.

The wisdom and the weakness in Weil’s thought can only become clear – as I see it – if one first tries to read her without bias, as far as this is possible. Though I realise that an ‘objective’ or ‘neutral’ reconstruction is nearly impossible, it is nevertheless my endeavour to try to do justice to her by avoiding the application of usual (classical) categories to her ideas. However, I sometimes have to say more than Weil said to make some of her ideas clearer. I deem it important to stress that the reconstruction of her ideas does not mean that I agree with all that she says, and from time to time, I do explicitly express my reservation, especially in the notes. The first three chapters are, therefore, above all, reconstructions of certain core concepts in Weil, while the last one is of a more critical nature since I will there show where and why I distance myself from her. The first chapter ‘God and Providential Necessity’ examines Weil’s concepts of God and of Necessity, thereby trying to understand how and why the love for God is also the love for necessity. The intimate relationship between God and Necessity also means an intimate relationship between God and misfortune (suffering and evil). Hence, I will show how misfortune, for Weil, is a mode of God’s presence. Also, the presence of God in the beautiful universe, religions and arts as well as in various gods (incarnations) is dealt with. The

following chapter 'The misery of human existence' focuses on Weil's conception of man and of his end. It also examines the implications of an all pervading necessity for human life and how to live with them. The absolute duty to give one's love exclusively to the (transcendent) good becomes clear in Weil's warning about the danger of the great social beasts.

The concept '*en hupomone*' is the theme of the third part, where the constitutive dimensions of the attitude are reconstructed. The underlying relationship between man and God, which makes *hupomone* a normative (hence, not optional) attitude, is examined. This relationship also explains Weil's conception of the deliverance (or purification) from evil and the role of attention in this process. The same concern with purity is to be found back in her concept of pure love (or knowledge) of God. I will show what it means to imitate the patience or passivity of matter. Finally, Job is reread as the personification of the one who is *en hupomone*. In the last chapter 'Unnecessary burdens: the problems with Weil's concept of Love,' I explicitly attempt to answer the question of whether *amor fati* or love for fate – with its implications for the human creature – is indeed a prerequisite for, or even is, the love for God. I will show that Weil's *hupomone*, a biblical term, actually presumes a different (non-biblical) concept of grace (or divine gifts), and therefore conceives hope and consolation as harmful. I argue that Weil's conceptions of God and of man presume and imply a great distance between human and divine loves, and therefore do not do justice to the human experience of love that can transcend itself. If the nature of love is to long to participate in the life of the other, and if God is Love itself, then the human love for God which demands a self-annihilation is highly questionable. I contend that Weil's *hupomone*, with its prerequisites and demands, lays an unnecessary, heavy and even unjust, burden on man by asking from him an inhuman kind of love, namely to refuse to be loved.

# Chapter I

## God and Providential Necessity

### Introduction

Simone Weil, in one of her letters to Father Perrin, says to know with the ‘certainty of experience’ that God is merciful.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the misery of human existence pervades all her writings. Suffering and misfortune, inflicted by the mechanism of necessity, characterise human life. And yet, according to Weil, we need to love the harshness of this necessity, ‘that is like a double-faced medal, the face turned towards us being domination, the other face turned towards God being obedience. [...] We have to thank God with all our heart for having given to us as absolute sovereign necessity, his mad slave, blind and perfectly obedient.’<sup>2</sup> The love for God implies the love for Necessity. This is quite an original way of dealing with the problem of theodicy, of reconciling the love or mercy of God with evil and suffering in the world. Marcion has been called a heretic in his struggle to do so. The Stoics called for indifference for things that are no virtue or vice, which include suffering and misfortune. The arguments of original sin and of the free human will are also used to try to explain or even justify this human reality. Another way of dealing with this problem is to negate the reality of the physical world, and to ‘look beyond the realm of appearances.’ Through the conceived intimate relation between God and His Necessity, and hence between God and *everything* that exists or happens, Weil is able to avoid paradoxes or dualisms.<sup>3</sup> It is no longer a question of love *in spite of* evil, presence of God *in spite of* misfortune but necessity with its suffering and misfortune are actually wonderful *divine* devices.<sup>4</sup> It must, however, be said that Weil’s theology did not go without wavering, without struggle and without doubt. There is sometimes a conflict between her steadfast intellectual reasoning and her compassion. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the intimate relation between God and Necessity, thereby understanding why, for Weil, the love for God necessarily means the love for a harsh necessity. I will try to reconstruct the implications of this intimate relationship for her understanding of Providence, misfortune and of divine revelations (or incarnations).

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre Concernant l’Amour de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 79; *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 120.



## I. Perfection and the Impersonal God

The true God, for Weil, is the God conceived as almighty, but who does not command everywhere where He has the power, ‘for, He is but in heaven, or hidden down here.’<sup>5</sup> And here on earth, it is Necessity, the perfect servant of God, which is sovereign. According to Weil, the mechanism of necessity is present in everything, in matter, animals and souls. Matter, the substance of the universe and of human creatures, is by essence unlimited.<sup>6</sup> The limits proceed from God who imprints beauty in it. Matter is actually something extraordinary since it is not spirit, not God and yet it is through matter that we are creatures.<sup>7</sup> Necessity ensures that the beautiful sea sometimes engulfs ships and lives. It would seem that necessity, therefore, is a blind mechanism, ‘that takes no spiritual perfection in consideration, tosses men continually about, throws some at the foot of the Cross.’<sup>8</sup> However, according to Weil, this apparent blindness becomes complete obedience, *love*, if we ‘carry our heart out of ourselves, out of the universe [...] to where our Father is.’<sup>9</sup> Necessity’s indiscriminate ruling is actually the perfect reflection of the indiscriminate ruling of God. This indifference, non-preference or non-intervention of God is what constitutes the perfection of God. Matter is beautiful precisely because it can only be passive and obedient to God who moulds it. As Weil says, ‘the beauty of the world appears when one recognises necessity as the substance of the universe, and obedience to the perfectly wise Love as the substance of necessity. This universe of which we are a fragment has no other being than being obedient.’<sup>10</sup> The perfect obedience of necessity that is without discernment and without the capacity for choice, flawlessly mirrors the will of God. And this is why it needs to be loved by those who love its Master.<sup>11</sup> Weil uses the old metaphor of the sun for God, to stress (its) His *indiscriminate* distribution of (light) Light. This complete impartiality, according to her, is the very substance of the perfection of the heavenly Father, reflected in necessity.<sup>12</sup> In other words, ‘God is love and nature is necessity, but this necessity, through obedience, is a mirror of love.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, *Cahiers II* (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 398.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 397.

<sup>8</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> In other words, the *amor fati*.

<sup>12</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 124.

Weil refers to a passage in Matthew that says ‘become the sons of your Father, the one of heaven, because he causes his sun to rise on the bad and the good, and sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.’<sup>14</sup> She thereafter explains that though God, in Christianity, is seen as a person, Christ in this passage conveys ‘above all the image of God as an impersonal order. [...] This impersonal and divine order of the universe has, among us, as image justice, truth and beauty.’<sup>15</sup> If Weil did not distinguish between the natural and supernatural, between ‘down here’ and heaven, one might nearly conclude that she shares the naturalist pantheism of the Stoics. Furthermore, while ‘God is all’ – which can also sound like pantheism – he is not all *as person*, says Weil. ‘As person he is nothing.’<sup>16</sup> To become nothing, therefore, is to become like God (*homoiosis Theoi*). Weil explicitly borrows these words from Plato’s *Theaetetus*.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, God is simultaneously personal and impersonal. Weil explains that while a beautiful work of art does have an author, its beauty lies in its imitation of the anonymous divine art. All beautiful works of art share the same anonymity. She further concludes that the impersonal beauty of the world proves that ‘God is at same time personal and impersonal, and neither the one nor the other.’<sup>18</sup> Weil points at the shortcomings of the concept ‘person’ and of personalism in general.<sup>19</sup> The latter – as Weil seems to have understood it – attributes to each human being a unique metaphysical personality that is permanent and indestructible in whatever circumstances.<sup>20</sup> She, on the other hand, held that necessity destroys the human personality,

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<sup>14</sup> Simone Weil, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 43. This is Weil’s own translation of Mt 5: 44-48.

<sup>15</sup> Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, pp. 43-4.

<sup>16</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 232.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948), p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, pp. 11-12. See also Eric O. Springsted, ‘Beyond the Personal: Weil’s Critique of Maritain’ in *Harvard Theological Review*, 98 (2005), pp 209-218; Christopher Hamilton, ‘Simone Weil’s “Human Personality”’: Between the Personal and the Impersonal’ in *Harvard Theological Review*, 98 (2005), pp 187-207.

<sup>20</sup> According to Hamilton and Springsted, Weil criticizes personalism for not understanding human suffering. Hamilton further notes that the problem that Weil also saw was that ‘no one, in real dealings with human beings, can actually believe this [that the personality of someone is indestructible]. The philosophy does not capture a proper understanding of what we all know to be the case: that a human being can be spiritually destroyed, that his soul can be killed, even as he lives.’ Hamilton, ‘Simone Weil’s “Human Personality”’, p. 188. Hamilton clearly bases himself on Weil’s *Écrits de Londres*, in which she says that ‘if the human person in [someone]

making him or her a thing. If necessity does not destroy it, it ought to be voluntarily destroyed as a sign of obedience and renunciation. This unique personality of a person is also his or her 'me' that has to be given up to God.<sup>21</sup> To become like God is to share in the divine impersonal perfection.

The love of the Samaritan exemplifies such a perfection or *pure* love because it 'is completely anonymous and hence completely universal.'<sup>22</sup> It does not take into account the personal characteristics of the dying man. It is an unconditional love that is independent of personal preferences. Even friendship, according to Weil, 'is only pure if it is, so to speak, surrounded everywhere by a compact envelope of indifference that maintains a distance.'<sup>23</sup> It is a disinterested friendship that ensures that the two friends do not possess or try to master each other. Weil refers to Matthew's parable of the eleventh hour workers to illustrate the indifferent, non-acting God.<sup>24</sup> The eleventh hour workers surprisingly get the same salary as the ones who have been working a whole day. The workers who have been bearing the heat and labour of the whole day do not expect such retribution and hence, are not very happy about the generosity of the owner of the vineyard.<sup>25</sup> It is interesting to read Weil's exegesis of the eleventh hour vineyard workers: '[...] If one pays a bit of attention [one sees that the vineyard owner] pays but one salary because he possesses but one salary. *He does not have any change.* [...] The moment does not count; neither the quantity nor the quality of the work in the vineyard is taken into account.'<sup>26</sup> To be like this owner, means being just in the same way as God is just. One should recall that Weil experienced the suffering of peasants and factory workers. 'Common utilitarian justice' that is based on 'merit' pays the labourer according to what he

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was what is sacred to me, then I could easily gouge his eyes out. Once blind, he would be a human person exactly like before. I would not have touched the human person in him at all. I would have just destroyed his eyes.' Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 225 ; *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 114.

<sup>25</sup> Mt 20:1-16

<sup>26</sup> Simone Weil, *L'Enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 333. My italics. An alternative reading is that God does take this into account and *despite the difference*, he still gives the same salary because everyone, in this case, needs it to live. The parable, it can be argued, stresses the mercy of God who gives bread (in the material and spiritual senses) even if one has not earned it.

produces.<sup>27</sup> No one sees the fact that he has been waiting in vain to be hired and that he cannot live on less than a given salary. To be perfect like God means being just, according to a supernatural standard of mercy and not one of meritocracy.

## II. Impersonal Providence

An in-different God implies a particular concept of Providence, which differs from the ‘common’ one that sees the hand of God in the course of history or in the lives of individual human beings. Weil is highly critical of beliefs in a Providence that saves particular individuals for a particular purpose. The same calamity kills the one and spares the other. As we have seen above, necessity is *non-intentional* and hence it is not an intentional act of Providence that the one be saved while the other has to die. ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ is, for Weil, the cry of every unfortunate nailed to the Cross.<sup>28</sup> Does it really mean that God is absent and has indeed abandoned His human creatures? It *seems* so cruel to give birth to a child to subsequently abandon him or her in the desert, at the mercy of the elements and wild beasts. Unless, of course, the elements and the beasts are somehow related to God. Man lives in the grip of necessity but this very necessity only does what God wills. There is, in Weil’s conception, indeed no space for a reality that is not willed by God. Why should God then intervene? He cannot contradict Himself. The order of the world is fixed and invariable, since it proceeds from, or rather *is* the eternal, unchangeable Wisdom. This excludes any temporal intervention of God since temporality is contrary to ‘eternal’. Hence, ‘divine Providence is not a change, an anomaly in the order of the world. *It is the order of the world itself.* Or rather it is the *ordering principle of this universe.* It is the eternal Wisdom, unique, extended throughout the whole universe in a sovereign network of relations.’<sup>29</sup> It is not surprising that Weil considers the conception of personal Providence as ‘absurd’ and the belief in the ‘particular intervention of God for particular ends [as] incompatible with true faith.’<sup>30</sup> ‘True faith’ consists in being ‘certain that the universe *in its totality* conforms to the will of God not only in the first sense,

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<sup>27</sup> Weil narrates how difficult it was for her, as factory worker, to produce the required quantity. The fact that she was ill or weak was not taken into account. She was just fired, which meant no money and hence no food.

<sup>28</sup> Mk 15: 34; Ps 22: 2.

<sup>29</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 358. My italics.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 355.

but also in the second, that is, in this universe, the good wins from evil.’<sup>31</sup> As for particular things and beings, they consist of a mixture of good and evil.

The image of divine Providence as the eternal ordering principle of the universe is, according to Weil, to be found in the sacred texts of China, India, Greece, and in the Gospels.<sup>32</sup> Weil’s concept of *amor fati* is, in the end, based on the Stoic understanding of fate as the *logos*, an intelligent force (or in some writings, breath of life), that proceeds with order and extends his providence on all beings. Weil accuses the Romans and the Israelites for having corrupted this old concept of Providence by making God become ‘a Roman owner who owns many slaves and properties.’<sup>33</sup> In the ‘Roman conception of God’ – as Weil sees it – God violates the order of the world to exercise influence on the law of causality so that the desired effects may be produced. This (‘Roman’ or ‘Jewish’) conception fails to consider ‘the absence and non-action of God down here.’<sup>34</sup> Hence, it is no less absurd to state that a miracle is the effect of a particular willing of God.<sup>35</sup> Just as ‘false’ is the idea of providential history, whereby history is conceived as a ‘governed continuity.’ Weil sees it as a ‘bad union of contraries’, ‘to seek harmony in the becoming, in what is the contrary of eternity.’<sup>36</sup> History is constituted by base and cruel acts mixed with a bit of purity.<sup>37</sup> Hence, it is vain to try to discern the governing Hand of God in history. The only thing that a so-called ‘providential mechanism’ does is to mix ‘a bit of genuine grandeur with lots of false grandeur.’<sup>38</sup> This ‘operation’ is not purposeful but is unintentional, indifferent and impersonal.

Weil asserts that the ‘notion of an impersonal Providence, and in this sense nearly analogous to a mechanism, is also to be found [in the Gospels].’<sup>39</sup> As usual, she refers to the passage in Matthew, which points out how God causes His sun to rise on the bad and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, to support her claim. Hence, no event is a special favour of God. *Grace* is a kind of exception to this mechanical law, and then again, not

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 341. My italics.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 352; Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 166.

<sup>34</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 166.

<sup>35</sup> Weil defines a miracle as a physical phenomenon that happens when the soul abandons itself completely to the good or to evil. The only thing that we can say is that ‘[...] all that happens, without any exception, conforms to the will of God as Creator.’ Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 335.

<sup>36</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 293.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 330. Mt 5: 45.

completely. The exception lies in the fact that God *responds* to the prayers of the one who desires perfection.<sup>40</sup> But at the same time, even grace is nearly mechanical, impersonal. Weil refers to the biblical parables to compare grace to seeds that are sown everywhere, in everyone. Whether they grow into trees that bear fruits depends on the ones who have received grace. ‘The non-intervention of God in the operation of grace is expressed as clearly as possible [in Mark 4: 26].’<sup>41</sup> One could speak of ‘supernatural mechanism’, in the sense, that God *cannot* refuse pure good to pure desire.<sup>42</sup> Through this supernatural law, the one *en hupomone* pulls or attracts grace while the one who turns away from God gives himself up to the law of gravity.<sup>43</sup> Hence, even in the case of grace, there is no active intervention of God. Yet, Weil mentions often enough that she ‘cannot help’ saying or doing or not doing certain things. She believed that she had to follow these impulses as obedience to God. And indeed, Weil says that ‘there is but one case where it is legitimate to speak of particular willing of God [...] God as source of inspiration.’<sup>44</sup> She also thought that it was a mystery.

### III. Misfortune as distance and mode of Presence

A non-intentional Providence or Necessity implies that events do not have meaning or purpose towards a certain end. This means that suffering and misfortune (*malheur*) do not have meaning and hence should not be explained. This is an essential element in Weil’s thought, which she repeatedly and unceasingly stresses.<sup>45</sup> According to her, ‘suffering, death, torture, all kinds of evil are not surprising since nature is subjected to the blind play of mechanical necessities. But what is surprising is that God has given to misfortune the power to seize the very soul of

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<sup>40</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 114.

<sup>41</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 332.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 112.

<sup>44</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 357.

<sup>45</sup> It is therefore highly remarkable that Eric Springsted can say that ‘if this necessity cannot be called friendly, it is at least useful for man’s taking his proper place in the world.’ Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (California: Scholars Press Chico, 1983), p. 79; ‘Because affliction shows us that there is no final good in this world it can have a use and even be a blessing.’ *Ibid.*, p. 83; ‘Weil therefore can find a purpose and use for affliction, through grace in which God comes and touches the soul of the afflicted.’ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

innocents and to take hold of it as sovereign master.’<sup>46</sup> This passage shows her struggle between her compassion for the ones who are crushed by misfortune and her belief that God has to be loved through all evil that happens, ‘because all that happens is real and that behind all reality there is God.’<sup>47</sup> Misfortune is not simple suffering, though related to it. As Weil explains, ‘misfortune is a more or less mitigated equivalent of death.’<sup>48</sup> According to her, a physical pain leaves no trace in the soul, whereas an unceasing suffering becomes a misfortune by marking the soul for the rest of its life. ‘There is misfortune if the event has seized a life and has uprooted it, has hit it directly or indirectly in all its parts, social, psychological, physical.’<sup>49</sup> Misfortune is ‘indifferent, and it is the cold of this indifference, this metallic cold, which chills till the very depth of the soul all those that it touches. They will never find back warmth. They will never ever believe that they are someone.’<sup>50</sup> They become things by losing their ‘personalities’. There are several (traditional) ways to respond to the problem of theodicy: the disobedience of the first man (Adam), punishment or the ‘argument’ of the contingency of man and hence of his mortality. Weil responds in several ways to the problem that she, at times, sees as a problem and at other times (seemingly) not really. Suffering and the exposure to misfortune namely belong to the created. Only the uncreated is not exposed to misfortune. Weil further explains that the ‘three faces of our being are always exposed to it. [...] our flesh is fragile [...] our soul is vulnerable [...] our social person is exposed to hazards.’<sup>51</sup>

According to Weil, creation itself – and not only the Passion of Christ – was an act of abnegation, of humiliation for God. Mathematically speaking, God is greater than the sum of God plus human creatures. Indeed, for Weil, creatures are mediocre beings who are a mixture of nothingness and a bit of divine purity (Good). ‘As Creator, God empties himself of his divinity [...]. He submits himself to necessity. [...] His love maintains in existence, in a free and autonomous existence, beings other than Him.’<sup>52</sup> It is *out of love* that God abandons these creatures to misfortune and sin. For, if He would not abandon them, they would not be since His presence (the Good) burns and destroys evil. God as Fire that purifies can be retraced back to ‘ancient’ religions. The God of Moses also reveals himself in a burning bush. Weil does stress that Moses was brought up in Egyptian wisdom. She succeeds in selecting the most

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<sup>46</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 101.

<sup>47</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>51</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, pp. 108-9.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

controversial passages of the Bible to paint a very vivid (to say the least) picture of what it means to be struck by the ‘sword’ of God.<sup>53</sup> Hence the letter to the Hebrews, ‘for the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.’<sup>54</sup> And the famous quote in Matthew: ‘Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.’<sup>55</sup> Similarly, she refers to Rama, the incarnation of God, who ‘went to find [the Sudra], and killed him with his sword. Directly afterwards, the soul of the dead appeared to him and fell to his feet, thanking him of the glory that he has conferred to him through the contact with this blessed sword.’<sup>56</sup> The contact with God kills. We can only exist because there is screen between us and God. The destruction of this screen – the universe in which we live, of which we are a fragment – means that all becomes the Good, God without creation.<sup>57</sup>

The ‘protective’ screen or distance between God and human creatures is a key concept in Weil’s theology, (indirectly) enabling her to ‘reconcile’ suffering, misfortune and evil with the love or goodness of God. ‘One needs to place God at an infinite distance to conceive him innocent of evil; reciprocally, evil indicates that one needs to place God at an infinite distance.’<sup>58</sup> This distance is a proof of God’s inconceivable love for us. In the first place, He creates beings that are so distant from him and thereafter, He has to *descend* a very long distance towards them. As Weil puts it, ‘the love is proportional to the distance.’<sup>59</sup> The Cross or ‘what has been made a curse’ is the farthest from God and yet, there, in the abyss of suffering, God is nearly perfectly present through His absence.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the experienced absence of God is a prerequisite for the mystical union with God. This is the mystical language that Weil uses to try to explain the ‘purity, perfection, plenitude,’ of the Cross.<sup>61</sup> It is also the language

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>54</sup> Heb 4: 12-13. For quotes from the bible, I have made use of several English translations thanks to the online resource <http://biblos.com/> as well as Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979) and La Sainte Bible (Paris: Alliance Biblique Universelle, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> Mt 10: 34.

<sup>56</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 140.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>58</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 112.

<sup>59</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 36.

<sup>60</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, pp. 106, 110.

<sup>61</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 36.



used by John of the Cross, which Weil literally borrows when she says that the supreme dark night, an agony, is needed for absolute purity.<sup>62</sup> The experienced absence of God is the dark night that destroys the ‘person’ or ‘I’ (evil) of the unfortunate completely, creating total space for the incarnation of God.<sup>63</sup> Weil holds that ‘wherever there is misfortune, there is the Cross, hidden, but present to whoever chooses truth rather than lie and love rather than hate. Misfortune so conceived is a form of Redemption and a *mode of Divine Presence*. The unfortunate who continues to love through the sensible and yet *unreal* evil, goes through the agony of the dark night or the absence of God to finally touch something that is no longer misfortune. It is nothing sensible since the highest Reality, God, is not sensible.

Misfortune, especially extreme misfortune, implies the loss of personal existence and is therefore the way for the incarnation, or total presence of God in the unfortunate. According to Weil, pure joy and pure misfortune, in the sense of joy without dissatisfaction and misfortune without consolation, are the ‘only two keys through which one enters the pure land [...] of the real.’<sup>64</sup> The concept of redemptory or purifying pain or suffering can be found in various religions, including Christianity. Yet, Weil goes even further by claiming that misfortune is the touch of the love of God. As we saw above, misfortune is only possible because everything is governed by the non-intentional, blind necessity. Yet, necessity is nothing else but pure obedience to God. This logically implies that the touch of necessity is the touch of God, in joy or suffering. Weil says that the face of love can be discerned in misfortune if one accepts to see misfortune face to face. She uses several metaphors to explain how misfortune is a touch of Love. One is the affectionate quarrel between lovers, through which they confirm the profundity of their love.<sup>65</sup> The other one, which is the most often used by her, is the two modes of God’s touch. Joy is the gentleness of the contact with the love of God while ‘misfortune is the wound of this same contact.’<sup>66</sup> She argues that the modality – painful or not – does not matter as long as the presence is experienced. Misfortune is, in this way, the surest sign of God’s existence, because it cannot be confused with anything else. Joy, on the other hand, can be earthly. The ‘why’ of the unfortunate, however, has no other answer than silence. As Weil says, ‘silence is the word of God [...] Christ is the silence of God.’<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>64</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 83.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>66</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 70.

<sup>67</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 129.

#### IV. God and Beauty

Pain, suffering and misfortune are inflicted by the order of the world, which is, as we saw above, nothing else than divine providence. Hence, Weil says that ‘each time that we undergo pain, we can say to ourselves with truth that is the universe, the order of the world, the beauty of the world, the obedience of the creation to God that enters into our body. From then onwards how would we not bless with the most tender gratitude the Love that sends us this gift?’<sup>68</sup> The material universe, as a whole, has as substance necessity while obedience to the perfectly wise Love is the substance of necessity.<sup>69</sup> This essential consciousness, Weil asserts, is the prerequisite to see the beauty of the world. Or, one has to experience necessity in one’s own flesh, like Job, to see the beauty of the world.<sup>70</sup> One can then see that the universal order is pure obedience to Love and therefore, can only be beautiful. All genuine beauty can only be divine. According to Weil, ‘there is nothing pure down here except the sacred objects and texts, the beauty of nature [...] and to a lesser degree, human beings in whom God lives and works of art that are the products of divine inspiration.’<sup>71</sup> To this list, one can add *science* that has as object ‘the study and the theoretical construction of the order of the world. The order of the world in relation to the mental, psychological and corporal structure of man.’<sup>72</sup> Astrology, ‘transcendent’ alchemy and Greek geometry constituted ‘a symbolic language concerning religious truths.’ For instance, ‘the rectangular triangle in a circle is the image of the supernatural mediation between God and man.’<sup>73</sup> The beauty of the arts and science reflects the beauty of the universe since only the *totality* (whole) of the universe is perfectly good and hence beautiful. Everything *in* the universe is mixed with evil, hence beautiful by analogy.

Weil argues that the ‘beauty of the world is nearly the only way through which one can allow God to penetrate [daily human lives].’<sup>74</sup> By saying this, she refers to her context and time,

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<sup>68</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 116.

<sup>69</sup> Weil distinguishes between the universe as a whole and the things that live *in* the universe. The sum of these things is not the same as the universe. The Universal Beauty is perhaps best understood as a Platonic Form in which the particulars participate.

<sup>70</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 112.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 160.

<sup>73</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 61.

<sup>74</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 151. The full quote is: ‘And yet, in our epoch, in the countries of the white race, the beauty of the world is nearly the only way through which one can allow God to penetrate.’

where the love for religions and compassion (love for fellow beings) had lost their meanings, while the sentiment of the beautiful, however mutilated, still remained in man.<sup>75</sup> For Weil, beauty is not an attribute of matter itself but ‘is a relation of the world to our sensibility, this sensibility that depends on the structure of our body and our soul.’<sup>76</sup> But since the body and soul are subjected to gravity, it does imply that not everyone can ‘see’ this beauty. Only the ones who have ‘faith that the universe is beautiful at all levels’ can experience this divine beauty.<sup>77</sup> ‘The artist, the *savant*, the thinker, the contemplator must, to really admire the universe, see through [the] film of unreality that veils it and makes it for nearly all men at nearly all times of their life, a dream or a theatre scenery.’<sup>78</sup> Yet, she says that the beauty of the world is the easiest and most natural way to God. The beautiful is the real presence of God in matter.<sup>79</sup> Hence, Weil can say that the universe is the body of God.<sup>80</sup> She points at the strange absence of the concept of universal beauty in the Christian tradition, while ‘in Antiquity, the beauty of the world had an important place in thoughts and enveloped the entire life with a wonderful poetry.’<sup>81</sup> The only (New Testament) biblical passages where the beauty of the world is mentioned – says Weil – are the ones of the lilies that grow without labour, the birds that are fed without sowing and the indiscriminate rain and sun.<sup>82</sup> For Weil, it is the perfect obedience of matter which constitutes the beauty of the universe.<sup>83</sup> The latter ‘[...] is a finality that contains no end. A beautiful thing contains no good, besides itself, in its totality, as it appears to us.’<sup>84</sup> The pure things have to be loved for their *beauty* and are *implicit* ways to love God.<sup>85</sup>

Human beings are ‘to a lesser degree’ pure precisely because they do not obey Love as matter does. This is also the reason why their products of art or science are relatively, and not completely, beautiful and sometimes ‘perverse’. The other paradox is beautiful art from men who are ‘not enlightened by God.’ According to Weil, they obey without knowing.<sup>86</sup> The same

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>79</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 152.

<sup>80</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 277.

<sup>81</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 149.

<sup>82</sup> Mt 6: 24-34; Mt 5: 44-48.

<sup>83</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 155; *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 114.

<sup>84</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 155. Weil quotes Kant.

<sup>85</sup> See chapters II and III.

<sup>86</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 114.

criterion of beauty (or perfection) plays a role in her judgement of literature and of holy texts of various religions, including Christianity. But of course, for Weil, ‘nothing surpasses Plato.’<sup>87</sup> In one of her autobiographical letters, she says that ‘after this [her being taken by Christ] I felt that Plato was a mystic, that all the Iliad is filled with Christian light [...] that Dionysius and Osiris are in a certain way the Christ himself. [...] I was incapable of thinking of him [Christ] without conceiving him as God. [...] I read the Bhagavad-Gita [...] these wonderful words with such a Christian tone, put in the mouth of an incarnation of God.’<sup>88</sup> The Old Testament, on the other hand, did not deserve the status of ‘sacred text’ because of the ‘narratives full of merciless cruelties.’<sup>89</sup> The source of the beauty of the Iliad, for example, is that the poet has sufficiently loved God. Weil claims that only the one who has the *amor fati*, that is, can love necessity as the touch of God, can see the beauty of the universe. This beauty is the reflection of the love of God or of the extent to which there is a union with this love. Not only does she say to be able to see the beauty of the universe, but she also uses the criterion of beauty to *assess* religions and texts. An obvious concern is whether what she experiences as beautiful is also beautiful for someone else. In other words, Weil’s judgement raises the question of whether her norm is a universal one that can be shared by others.

## V. God and the gods

God is impersonal and personal, says Weil. While she identifies the impersonal God with the divine order of the universe or with justice, truth and beauty, she discerns the personal God in various mythical figures.<sup>90</sup> Hence, ‘*Brahma* in the Gita is impersonal God while Vishnu or Hari, incarnated in Krishna, [is] personal God.’<sup>91</sup> In the case of Judaism, she cannot accept all the revelations in the Old Testament as being divine. Weil expresses her difficulty to see the ‘Jehovah of the Bible and the Father invoked in the Gospel as the same and one being.’<sup>92</sup> According to her, Christianity has become corrupted through the influence of the Old Testament and of the Roman Empire. She argues that both adored power and hence disregarded that (supernatural) justice is to refuse to use the power that one has. All the cruelties, Inquisition, crusades and extermination of heretics by the Roman Catholic Church are hence to be

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 46.

<sup>89</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 63.

<sup>90</sup> I use ‘myth’ in the correct sense of ‘story’ and not derogatively.

<sup>91</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 429.

<sup>92</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 64.

explained.<sup>93</sup> The God of Israel makes temporal promises, intervenes in history and gives commandments to destroy peoples in order to conquer their lands. The Hebrews, says Weil, got ‘a carnal and collective God’, a ‘tribal God.’<sup>94</sup> This remark should not surprise us if we remember that Weil’s God is one who is indifferent (impartial) and non-active as far as this world is concerned. It is a God in Heaven. Weil reproaches the Hebrews for not having accepted ‘the Egyptian revelation’ and states that in the Old Testament, ‘only Abel, Enoch, Noah, Melchisedech, Job and Daniel are pure. [...] Isaiah is the first who brings pure light.’<sup>95</sup> According to Weil, the essential knowledge concerning God is that God is the Good while all the rest is secondary. The conclusion of her biblical exegesis is that the Hebrews before Moses only knew God as ‘almighty’. ‘To know divinity only as power and not as good, is idolatry, and it does not matter whether there is one God or several.’<sup>96</sup> It is Moses, according to Weil, who – thanks to his instruction in ‘Egyptian wisdom’ – conceived of God as one who imposes commandments of a moral order and ‘defined God as being.’<sup>97</sup> She, however, carries on to argue that the ‘Good is above Being and God is the Good before being what is.’<sup>98</sup>

Condemning the Hebrews along with their God on the one hand, Weil is full admiration and approval for the Books, the Gods and the religious peoples of ancient Egypt, Greece, India and China. According to her, ‘the Taoist texts of china, anterior to the Christian era [...] contain thoughts identical to those of the profoundest passages of Christian mystics.’ And this knowledge is the conception of divine action as being ‘a non acting action.’<sup>99</sup> She points at the resemblance between the Hindu texts and the thought of mystics such as John of the Cross and Suso. Both deal with the ‘nothing’, ‘nothingness’, the negative knowledge of God and ‘the state of total union of the soul with God.’<sup>100</sup> The Greeks, according to Weil, knew that ‘God was love,’ expressed, for instance, ‘in Cleanthes’ hymn to Zeus.’<sup>101</sup> As a great lover of ancient Greece, Weil had to, however, deal with the fact that the Greek gods were not exactly models of virtuosity. ‘[...] in the Iliad, they were all demoniac, except Zeus. But the Greeks did not take their gods seriously. In the Iliad they were comical interludes, like the clowns in Shakespeare.

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<sup>93</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 167.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>96</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>99</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 59.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

While the Jews on the other hand took Jehovah very seriously.<sup>102</sup> Referring regularly to the Egyptian ‘Book of the Dead’, she says that the Egyptians had the knowledge of God as the Good, who also expected the good life from His people. The same book ‘explains salvation as an assimilation of the soul to God through the grace of God. [...] God is called Osiris, [...] a God who has lived on earth, in human flesh, doing only good, has suffered passion, is dead, has become, in the other world, the saviour, the judge and the sovereign good of souls.’<sup>103</sup>

In her writings on ancient religions and texts, Weil points at the resemblance between the life of Osiris, Dionysius and that of Jesus Christ. All nations have had their Lamb, their Christ and the saving power of the Cross. The incarnations and ‘humiliations’ of God are, for Weil, namely the very essence of God. The nations ‘knew that God, to be loved as pure good, has to strip away the attribute of power.’ ‘The Passion of God was the very object of the Egyptian mysteries, and also of Greek mysteries, where Dionysius and Persephone are the equivalent of Osiris.’<sup>104</sup> Hence, the myth of Zeus narrates that He revealed himself in the form of a slaughtered ram. ‘Prometheus is the Christ himself, without the determination of time and space; it is the story of the Christ projected into eternity. [...] He is the redeemer of men. He has undergone suffering and humiliation [...] out of an excess of love.’<sup>105</sup> To consider the incarnations of God as nearly ‘necessary’ for God might seem surprising if one remembers that Weil stresses the *non-action* of God. Unless the incarnations also obey certain supernatural mechanical laws, just like in the case of grace, making them inseparable from creation. Grace is the counterweight to the gravity of evil, and the various instances of the incarnated God act like levers against the evil in the world. The figures whom Weil sees as incarnated Gods are so pure that the one who looks at them *en hupomone* is delivered from a lot of evil, just as the Jews were delivered from the venomous snakes by looking at Moses’ bronze snake.<sup>106</sup>

Weil believes in a ‘Great Revelation’, in one ‘thought that lived in the best minds, expressed in the mysteries and sects of Egypt, Thrace, Greece, Persia [while] the works of Plato embody the best expression of this thinking.’<sup>107</sup> And this was before the Roman conquests. It is from this universal source that ‘Christianity is issued [...].The Gnostics, Manicheans, the Cathars seem to be the only ones to have remained faithful to it. [...] They are the only ones to

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>106</sup> Num 21: 4-8. Weil’s particular conception of deliverance from evil will be examined more thoroughly in chapters two and three.

<sup>107</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 65.

have escaped the coarseness of mind, the baseness of heart, which the roman domination has spread in so many territories.’<sup>108</sup> She reproaches the Jews for having refused the old wisdom, and hence, for not having been able to distinguish between the promises of God and the promises of the devil. ‘The promises of Yahweh to Israel are the same that the devil has made to Christ [...].’<sup>109</sup> She points at how the Hebrews ‘attributed indiscriminately to God all that is extra-natural, diabolical things like divine things [...].’<sup>110</sup> Yet, Weil herself gives the impression of attributing everything to God. She is the one who says that ‘all that exists is equally sustained in existence by the creating love of God.’<sup>111</sup> If God would not love so many things, they would be without existence.<sup>112</sup> She criticizes Augustine for having called evil what is good, and says that ‘the only sin that is not forgiven [...] consists in saying that the good, recognised as such, proceeds from evil.’<sup>113</sup> Weil seemed to have believed that she could clearly distinguish between the real goods and the false goods. There are namely, ‘many apparent goods [that] are not genuine goods. For example the virtues of the Roman type or Cornelian type are no virtues at all.’<sup>114</sup> The question that arises is whether Weil’s criteria of assessment are legitimate. It is certainly no small thing to claim to discern the incarnation of God in all kinds of figures.

## Conclusion

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. Hence, Hamilton’s remark that Weil’s ‘syncretic manner of working, ransacking other cultures to find intimations of Christianity in them’ is not completely correct. Hamilton, ‘Simone Weil’s “Human Personality”,’ p. 195. It is the other way round: Christianity is evaluated according to this ‘Great Revelation’.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>111</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 79.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>113</sup> ‘St. Augustine says that if a non-believer clothes those who are naked, refuses to bear false witness even under torture, etc., he does not act well, even if God does good deeds through him. He also says that the one who is outside the Church, non-believer or heretic, and who lives well, is like a good runner on a bad way; the more he runs well, the farther he moves away from the good way. That is social idolatry that has as object the Church.’ Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 53.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 54. The Cornelian type of virtues refers to the virtues that Pierre Corneille seemed to have admired. Someone like Victor Hugo saw them as heroic and optimistic virtues. Glory (*gloire*), honour, force of will and self-esteem are prominent in Corneille’s plays.

Misfortune deserves its name because of the indifference of necessity that disregards the virtues and vices of men, crucifying some while sparing others. Weil's theology converts this apparent madness into perfect obedience, into beauty, through her conceived intimacy between God and Necessity. The latter is the perfect servant of God, obeying and reflecting the indiscriminate will of its Master. The impartiality of Necessity becomes the reflection of the impartiality of God, making Him an 'impersonal' God who favours no one. Misfortune – not its exterior effects that are nearly always bad – can hence conceived be as *good*, being the ultimate sign of God's love for us. Yet, in Weil's writings, one can see the struggle between her compassion and her conviction that everything that happens *has* to be loved because behind everything, there is a reality of God. At one time, she confesses that the contact with the misfortune of others pains her so atrociously 'that the love of God becomes for some time nearly impossible to me. I would nearly say impossible. To the extent that I am worried about myself. I reassure myself a little bit by remembering that Christ has cried by foreseeing the horrors of the sacking of Jerusalem. I hope that he forgives compassion.'<sup>115</sup> On another occasion, she says that 'one would be often be tempted to cry tears of blood to think how much misfortune crushes the unfortunates who are incapable of making good usage of it. But considering things coldly, it is here not a more pitiful waste than the beauty of the world.'<sup>116</sup> Here predominates her belief that the order of the world is beautiful while man is a mediocre creature who should de-create himself. She sometimes even has the tendency to see misfortune as something that is a 'deserved punishment,' since all men share in evil through their ignorance, indifference or crimes.<sup>117</sup> Creation and God together are less than God Himself. God is the Fire that purifies, destroying everything that is not divine and hence human creatures exist as long as there is a screen – the universe – between man and God. In Weil's theology, the natural mechanical laws have their counterweights in the supernatural laws to which grace and the incarnations of God nearly 'obey'.

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<sup>115</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 72.

<sup>116</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 130.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.



## Chapter II

### The misery of human existence

#### Introduction

In Simone Weil's conception of God, human creatures exist as long as that there is a screen – the universe – between man and God. Yet, the very substance of the universe is the indifferent necessity that disregards the virtues and vices of men, crucifying some while sparing others. In Weil's writings, this blindness is actually perfect obedience to the impartiality of God. 'This universe of which we are a fragment has no other being than being obedient.'<sup>1</sup> The universe is passive, obedient matter in the hands of the Maker. The waves of the sea are beautiful precisely due to their obedience to a certain mechanism, even if they swallow ships and lives. The fact that the substance of the universe is indifferent necessity does have implications for the conception of human existence and of the human creature. Necessity implies 'the absence of finality [...]. Things have causes and no ends. [...] Misfortune forces [one] to feel the absence of finality with whole one's soul.'<sup>2</sup> Yet, for Weil, misfortune is not what causes human misery but only reveals it.<sup>3</sup> Human misery, for her, is the very screen that allows man to live a separate existence from God. In other words, the misery of man is his very existence as a creature. The real and true centre lies on the other side of the screen and that is why the human creature is arrogant if he forgets that he is God, or in other words, if he believes that he is someone else besides God, says Weil.<sup>4</sup> 'God created us with the freedom to consent to our own de-creation. God has authorised us to live a separate existence but it is up to us to refuse this authorisation. God has given me being so that I may give it back to him.'<sup>5</sup> This anti-humanist conception of man and of human existence is the core of this chapter. A life without finality does not mean passivity but, on the contrary, creativity that transforms life into a beautiful poem or parable. The model for this human creation is the beauty of the universe – also the model for artists and poets – and the source for this transformation is Christianity. However, Christianity can only be incarnated into daily life if it integrates the Stoic love for the universe.

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre Concernant l'Amour de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948), p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, *Cahiers I* (Paris: Plon, 1951), p. 200.

<sup>5</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 48.

## I. Mediocrity of the person and the sacred Impersonal

The most essential truth that human beings would need to see is that ‘there is no good down here. But as soon as one has seen this truth one covers it with lies. [...] This knowledge is deadlier than a sword; it inflicts a death that frightens more than carnal death. With time it kills in us what we call me.’<sup>6</sup> According to Weil, human beings are mediocre precisely because they flee from the ‘truth’ that the Good is not in this world and their very existence is futile. They refuse to see their misery that is the fact that they can be turned into a despicable mass that arouses horror rather than pity. The misery and mediocrity of man implies that he is incapable of any *natural* good, but only has the choice between evil and *supernatural* good.<sup>7</sup> This mediocrity is his fate as a *creature* whose body and soul are governed by necessity. Weil uses the metaphor of gravity to explain how all the ‘*natural* movements of the soul are governed’ by laws analogous to material laws. ‘Only grace is an exception. [...] All one calls baseness is a phenomenon of gravity.’<sup>8</sup> The tendency to spread the evil inherent in oneself outside or the desire to see another suffer exactly the same thing as one does, obeys a certain mechanism of equilibrium. By doing so, one namely ‘fills emptiness in oneself by creating it in someone else.’<sup>9</sup> The harm that human beings inflict upon each other is caused by mechanical necessity. According to her, all human beings carry an animal nature in them, compelling them, for instance, to attack their mutilated wounded fellow men. She uses the metaphor of the wounded hen that is pecked by other hens. ‘They can only escape it [the mechanical necessity] proportionally to the place that is occupied by the genuine supernatural in their souls.’<sup>10</sup> Sins are simply a consequence of human misery, of being a creature.

The supernatural is the only thing that is pure, sacred and real. Yet, this is no legitimising of the oppression or despising of the natural human being. The obligation towards the human being is eternal, since it ‘responds to the eternal destiny of the human being.’<sup>11</sup> The human being has to be respected because of the sacred in him or her. But this sacred, ‘far from being the person, [...] is impersonal. [...] All that is impersonal in man is sacred, and that

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<sup>6</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 210.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Weil, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), pp. 29, 31. Weil criticises the notion of the supernatural good as a sort of supplement to the natural good.

<sup>8</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil, *L’Enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 11.

only.<sup>12</sup> Weil explains that the sacred in science is truth while the sacred in art is beauty. Yet, truth and beauty are ‘impersonal [...], perfection is impersonal.’<sup>13</sup> In trying to understand Weil’s impersonal, one ought to bear in mind that the human being is mediocre, governed by necessity and can be turned into a miserable mass. This consciousness of vulnerability and mediocrity means that the sacredness of the human being must be non-human and non-contingent. The only thing that cannot be soiled is the Good, the impersonal Good or God, a point in the soul of the creature, which is hidden from the human being. Weil stresses that ‘the person in us, that is the part in us of error and sin. All effort of mystics has always aimed at that there be no part in their soul that says ‘I’.<sup>14</sup> Man does not have being but merely a borrowed circumstantial existence while his being ‘is located behind the curtain, on the side of supernatural.’ The ‘I is hidden for

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<sup>12</sup> Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, p. 16. Weil’s criticism of personalism (and of Jacques Maritain) has received quite a bit of attention. However, there does not seem to be agreement on what she meant with her ‘impersonal’. See Eric Springsted, ‘Beyond the Personal: Weil’s Critique of Maritain’ in *Harvard Theological Review*, 98 (2005), pp 209-218; Christopher Hamilton, ‘Simone Weil’s “Human Personality”’: Between the Personal and the Impersonal’ in *Harvard Theological Review*, 98 (2005), pp 187-207. Hamilton thinks that the impersonal to which Weil refers is a ‘kind of love – a kind of attention – in the light of which it is possible to see human beings as sacred.’ Hamilton, ‘Simone Weil’s “Human Personality”,’ p. 193. Eric Springsted stresses that ‘the impersonal is, for Weil, morally prior to any individual aspects of the human. That runs against the grain of liberal conceptions of the human being, including Maritain’s. But in the end the impersonal may alone be that which sustains our infinite love and concern and allows us to transcend our own personal aspirations in order to care for another.’ Springsted, ‘Beyond the Personal,’ p. 218.

<sup>13</sup> Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, p. 17. Some light might be shed on Weil’s impersonal by comparing it with Lyotard’s *L’Inhumain*. The impersonal, in Weil, is in the end the *non-human*. Lyotard notes that ‘Augustine was the first, with Paul, to reveal that inner share of the me with this Other who, in him, is more profound than him. More profound in that the me cannot understand it. At least Augustine had faith that the Other, the God of love, only wanted his well-being. [...] The anguish that I am talking about is another kind than the worry of *civisme*. It resists the republic and the system, it is more archaic than them, it protects and runs away from, at the same time, the inhuman stranger that is in us, “joy and terror”, says Baudelaire.’ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), pp. 182-3. ‘To grant value in me but to what is transcendent, that is, stranger to me in myself, who (that) is not me – and to nothing else, without any exception.’ Simone Weil, *Cahiers II* (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, p. 17.

me (and for others); is on the side of God...is in God... is God (atman).<sup>15</sup> Weil's consciousness that 'when I am somewhere, I soil the silence of heaven and of earth through my breathing and my heartbeat' speaks for itself.<sup>16</sup> God, the absolute pure Good, is the only one who can love himself. He has created human beings to love himself through them. It is only when the human creature becomes nothing (nearly equivalent to the state of non-creation) that God can love himself through him or her.<sup>17</sup> This is also the aim of every human being. 'Once we have understood that we are nothing, the aim of all efforts is to become nothing. It is to this end that one suffers with acceptance, *it is to this end that one acts*, it is to this end that one prays.'<sup>18</sup>

Necessity is the screen between God and human beings so that they may exist. It is up to them 'to pierce the screen to cease to be.'<sup>19</sup> Men 'participate in the creation of the world by de-creating' themselves, leaving God alone with his beautiful universe.<sup>20</sup> Weil seems to have agreed with the Hindu philosophy that 'plurality is not, he runs from death to death, the one who believes seeing plurality in the universe.'<sup>21</sup> Her words that 'evil is multiple and fragmentary, the good is one; evil is apparent, the good is mysterious' fit in with her belief that the only good, centre and end is the Impersonal.<sup>22</sup> 'If only I could disappear, there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth where I walk, the sea that I hear [...].'<sup>23</sup> Yet, one should not get the idea to 'help' others disappearing and becoming nothing! It is not difficult to (perversely) conclude that if misfortune is the way to Truth, and that man should become nothing, one could contribute towards his de-creation. Anyway, one does not harm absolute good or purity since only the imperfect good can be affected. In this sense, Weil's argument can be said to suffer from the same weakness that she pointed at in personalism, with its metaphysical person. A lesser form of perversity is to justify the harm that one inflicts upon others or to appease one's conscience by appealing to the 'laws' of necessity. Yet, according to Weil, it is worse than

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<sup>15</sup> Weil, *Cahiers I*, p. 200.

<sup>16</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Weil, *Cahiers I*, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>23</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 49.

murder to push men who are not ready to receive misfortune into it, for one kills their souls.<sup>24</sup> The obligation towards one's fellow creature includes com-*passion* and for Weil, this is literally wanting a share in the misfortune of the other. It is 'to carry oneself in the other, is to consent to misfortune, that is, to the destruction of oneself.'<sup>25</sup> The transition from the personal (the person) to the impersonal (purity, God) is the task of the individual person, and no one else. 'God has created our autonomy so that we may have the possibility to give it up out of love. [...] We should want the preservation of autonomy [faculty of free choice] in our fellow creatures.'<sup>26</sup>

## II. Universal Beauty and life without finality

'It is when man sees himself as a squirrel turning round in a circular cage, that, if he does not lie, he is close to salvation.'<sup>27</sup> In other words, man is close to truth if he realises that there is no finality in human existence. The peasant and the factory worker labours to eat and eats to labour. The ruling of necessity ensures that things only have causes and no ends, hence placing the real centre outside this world.<sup>28</sup> According to Weil, the essence of created things is to be 'intermediaries' or '*metaxu*'.<sup>29</sup> They are intermediaries for each other, rungs towards God.<sup>30</sup> Weil states that 'only the one who loves God with a supernatural love can consider a means as means only.'<sup>31</sup> It is the one whose eyes are enlightened by the *amor fati* who can see that the beauty of the universe is the only finality down here. He is contented with whole his soul that things, beings and events are as they should be, that they exist and does not wish that they did

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<sup>24</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 103. See the discussion in Hamilton, 'Simone Weil's "Human Personality",' p. 193. It is highly dubious whether the thought that one kills the soul of someone else is actually a reason for not doing so if one wishes to.

<sup>25</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 134. Weil rejects the notion of rights but at the same time, she cannot offer a moral (non-metaphysical) ground for the 'eternal obligation' that one has towards one's fellow creatures. I dare say that, despite the insufficiency of the concept of (natural) rights, it is still one that tries to integrate the reality of evil or the realisation that man does not always (to say the least) have the notion of this eternal obligation.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>27</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 179.

<sup>28</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 169.

<sup>29</sup> Weil, *Cahiers I*, pp. 40, 80, 81. Weil has clearly borrowed Plato's *metaxu*.

<sup>30</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

not exist or should have been different.<sup>32</sup> ‘The universe is beautiful like a perfect work of art would be beautiful. [...] Hence it does not contain anything that can constitute an end or a good. It does not contain any finality, except the universal beauty itself.’<sup>33</sup> Beauty only is good in itself. The order of the universe is beautiful precisely because of the absence of intention, through the perfect obedience of matter to necessity.<sup>34</sup> ‘In the beauty of the world, necessity becomes object of love. [...] the sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that ships, sometimes, disappear in it. It is this perfect obedience that is its beauty.’<sup>35</sup> If the sea would modify its movements to spare these ships, it would be a being of discernment and choice, and ‘not this perfectly obedient fluid.’

Weil considers the imitation of the beauty of the world, that is, perfect obedience, as the response to the absence of finality. In other words, we are called to abnegate our own will and to act without intention.<sup>36</sup> Beauty can be the only good, the only motivation for human actions. Weil goes on to argue that the desire for beauty actually underlies all human actions and other desires, consciously or unconsciously. Hence, ‘the love of power amounts to the same thing as the desire to establish order among men and things around oneself. [...] This order is desirable for its effect of the sentiment of the beautiful.’<sup>37</sup> For Weil, order is ‘the first need of the soul, the one that is the closest to its eternal destiny.’<sup>38</sup> Science has for object, the study and the theoretical construction of the order of the world.<sup>39</sup> Hence, scientists long for and seek beauty without perhaps knowing that they do. Man continuously seeks beauty, even if he does it in base ways. ‘Different kinds of vices, the use of drugs in the literal or metaphorical sense, all this constitutes the search for a state where the beauty of the world is perceptible.’<sup>40</sup> According to Weil, all the tastes and preferences of men seem to be a way to access the beauty of the world. Human love and friendship relations are also the expressions of such a longing. She explains that the human being experiences the love for the things in nature as an incomplete and painful love, because matter cannot respond. According to her, ‘men want to direct this same love

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<sup>32</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>38</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The order of the world in relation to the mental, psychological and corporal structure of man.’ Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 160.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

towards a being who is their alike, capable of responding to this love, to say yes, to give themselves.<sup>41</sup>

‘Carnal love, in all its forms, from the highest, true marriage or platonic love, till the lowest, till debauchery, has for object the beauty of the world.’<sup>42</sup> Weil notes the affinity between carnal love and eternal beauty. Marriage imitates the universal beauty through the unconditional and permanent consent of two beings who give themselves to each other. Rape is loathsome precisely because ‘one seeks [...] an equivalent of God’ in beings whose consent is not respected.<sup>43</sup> An exchange of love on basis of a superficial consent is also illegitimate because it does not spring from ‘this central point of the soul where the yes can only be eternal.’<sup>44</sup> Yet, all these forms of love and vices are partial, incomplete and unconscious searches for beauty. In the end, it is only the sacred Impersonal or the ‘Incarnation’ that can satisfy the unlimited human desire (for beauty).<sup>45</sup> This is the union to which the mystics refer and this is why Weil argues that they are the legitimate owners of the love language. According to her, it is only with God that man has the right to desire to be directly united.<sup>46</sup> Friendship (also in marriage) is a pure human love only if there is a distance between the two beings. The one who loves with a pure love directs a universal love towards a particular human being and does not wish to be one with the other.<sup>47</sup> Weil calls the union between friends or spouses *adulterous* if they believe that they are one. Indeed, only the Good deserves complete consent and abnegation of one’s will, which takes place in the mystical union with God. There is no good, no finality down here since it is the essence of the created to be only an intermediary, and this includes the human creature.

### **III. The creation of finality in social life**

The misery of man is that he lives as a creature, as a *metaxu*, who cannot transcend the domain of degraded good. The consciousness and experience of the lack of finality in human existence is a ‘truth that kills the I,’ says Weil. But there are two ways of losing the ‘I’: one is voluntary, from inside and another is from outside, through extreme misfortune.<sup>48</sup> It does not mean that the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 35.

one whose I has been destroyed has lost his egoism. On the contrary, some beings are reduced to a 'naked, vegetative egoism. An egoism without I.'<sup>49</sup> There is one way to prevent misfortune from causing such harm, to prevent the I from being destroyed from the outside and this is by refusing to revolt out of love for God. Weil indeed explains that it is extreme revolt to misfortune which finally kills the I from the outside. The refusal to revolt allows the I to be destroyed from the *inside*, which is suffering but not evil. This is what Weil calls redemptory pain. The one who has *unwillingly* (reluctantly) lost the I is *uprooted*. Many factory workers, in her time, men, women and children, were such uprooted beings. Uprooting is 'the most dangerous illness of human societies, for, it multiplies itself.'<sup>50</sup> According to Weil, there are two possible behaviours of men who are uprooted. They can fall into 'an inertia that resembles death' or they actively try to uproot others.<sup>51</sup> The latter is the egoism without the I. The unfortunate one feels the emptiness of evil, of lack of finality, and tries to fill his own emptiness by creating it in others.<sup>52</sup> A society of such beings 'can only be an equilibrium of forces [...] since one cannot expect that a man without grace be just.'<sup>53</sup> 'Society needs to be organised in such way that injustices punish each other in a perpetual oscillation.'<sup>54</sup>

Social order or finality in labour and actions of social life needs to be created, to prevent the evils of the experience of the lack of finality.<sup>55</sup> Weil does not mention the word 'nihilism' but the effects of uprooting are, in the end, those of nihilism (or anomy). A 'good' (or just) order is one in which 'no one is forced to violate the rigorous obligations to fulfil other obligations.'<sup>56</sup> Weil speaks in terms of duties and not rights, for, man only has duties towards his fellow being and certain duties towards himself.<sup>57</sup> She argues that the duty towards the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>50</sup> Weil, *L'Enracinement*, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 16. This restores the *natural* equilibrium.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. The supernatural cannot be taken into account in the organisation of society since the supernatural only concerns the individual 'person'. Society is a collectivity and is hence not sensitive to the supernatural. Man has the choice between evil and the supernatural good, but the latter option is not valid for society. What remains is evil or sheer force, or what Hobbes called the 'state of nature'.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>56</sup> Weil, *L'Enracinement*, p. 18.

<sup>57</sup> As said above, personalism, humanism and the concept of rights are all fiercely criticised by Weil.



human being ‘does not rest on any convention’ but is eternal since it ‘responds to the eternal destiny of the human being.’<sup>58</sup> A just social order has to ensure that the vital human needs are fulfilled. The needs of the human soul, for Weil, are the need for order, liberty, obedience, responsibility, equality, hierarchy, honour, punishment, freedom of expression, security, risk, private property, collective property and truth, ‘more sacred than any other.’<sup>59</sup> Not every social order and end of social actions is acceptable to Weil. She rejects liberalism and the idea of progress. She characterizes liberalism by ‘the thirst to increase.’<sup>60</sup> The idea of progress is the ‘atheist idea par excellence’ since, according to her, it negates ‘the experimental ontological proof [...] that the mediocre can [not] out of himself produce the better.’<sup>61</sup> For Weil, on the contrary, humanity is deteriorating with every oscillation.<sup>62</sup>

Finality is taken away from the life of people who are conquered, since their past, traditions and hence all roots are destroyed. The only ‘finality’ is then the thought of revenge but the latter is ‘the worst of finalities.’<sup>63</sup> In the case of natural calamities, such as an earthquake, according to Weil, ‘one knows why one is subjected to the manifest power of nature,’ but the obedience to human force (totalitarianism, despotism) destroys all sentiment of legitimacy and creates an emptiness that is often filled by evil, leading to an exponential increase in evil.<sup>64</sup> The effects of illegitimate power can be compared to those of misfortune that strikes men who are not ready to receive it and who therefore become either apathetic or egoists without an I. For Weil, legitimacy has to be an invariable, continuity in time, which gives as finality to social life precisely something that is conceived as permanent or invariable. ‘This is why a reform must always appear, either like a return to a past that one had let become degraded, or like an adaptation of an institution to new conditions, adaptation that has for object not change, but on the contrary, the maintenance of an invariable.’<sup>65</sup> ‘The only thing that can make legitimacy, pure idea absolutely without force, something sovereign – the dharma that is the sovereignty of sovereignty and through which the weak balances the strong – that is la

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<sup>58</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>60</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 174.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>63</sup> Simone Weil, *Cahiers III* (Paris: Plon, 1956), p. 217.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

*pensée*: that has always been, that will always be.’<sup>66</sup> Weil’s *pensée* seems to come closest to Plato’s *nous*, or reason.<sup>67</sup> Legitimacy roots man by preserving the past that ‘presents us with something that is at the same real and better than us, and that can pull us upwards, which the future can never do.’<sup>68</sup>

Legitimate and hence, *just* is the authority if he does not use power wherever he can, similarly to the true God who does not command everywhere where He has the power.<sup>69</sup> This is why there can be no legitimacy without religion that is, without the implicit love for God or contact with God, the Good. According to Weil, the obedience to a man whose authority is not enlightened by such legitimacy is a ‘nightmare’.<sup>70</sup> The *legitimate* authority to whom one should obey can only be the law or one man, ‘naked, adorned only with the majesty of the oath, and not with a majesty borrowed from the big beast.’<sup>71</sup> Justice is, for Weil, ‘the Christian virtue par excellence’, that is also found in the Egyptian ‘Book of the Dead’.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the supernatural virtue of justice was known in the oldest religions, if not in most religions. Hence, legitimate, just authority – law or the sovereign – is, for Weil, the supernatural in human society.<sup>73</sup> The *natural necessity* is that, when there is a weak and a powerful, the weak obeys the will of the strong.<sup>74</sup> The supernatural virtue of justice consists in behaving exactly as if there was equality, in such a situation of unequal forces.<sup>75</sup> The legitimate authority creates finality by transforming social life into a (timeless) metaphor similar to the ones found in sacred books. Weil points out that the ‘mythologies of the peoples of antiquity – except the Romans – were

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Dharma is usually translated as ‘law’. In the case of Weil, one can most probably consider it as the eternal law or wisdom, or Stoic *logos*.

<sup>67</sup> Weil neither uses the word ‘reason’, nor *nous*, most probably to avoid confusion. But her use of *pensée* does not make things clearer. In any case, it is related to thinking and is non-material. ‘Since wisdom is *pensée* (*phronesis*), the image of Wisdom cannot be matter, as it is the case for Beauty, but a thinking being. And a visible image of Wisdom, a visible thinking being.’ Weil, *Cahiers III*, p. 45.

<sup>68</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 176.

<sup>69</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 130.

<sup>70</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 173.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 172. This one man, enlightened by reason (or *phronesis*) resembles very much Plato’s Philosopher-King.

<sup>72</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 130.

<sup>73</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 173.

<sup>74</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 128.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

such metaphors, the meanings of which the initiated knew, initiated were the ones who wanted it.<sup>76</sup> The ‘secret of the human condition’, says Weil, is that ‘there is, in inaction, no equilibrium between man and the surrounding forces of nature, which infinitely surpass him [...] There is equilibrium but in Action through which man recreates his own life in labour.’<sup>77</sup> In this lies the greatness (*grandeur*) of man: he always needs to recreate his life, to transform his life into a parable that has divine meaning.<sup>78</sup>

#### IV. Blessed are the poor

The poor, whose body is crushed by a whole day work, ‘carries in his flesh, like a thorn, the reality of the universe.’<sup>79</sup> According to Weil, this is ‘the immense privilege that God has reserved for his poor.’<sup>80</sup> The only difficulty is that the labourer, who has been subjected to matter, whose body has nearly become matter through excess fatigue and who is tormented by financial worries, cannot look at this privilege and love it. If he could do so, he would love the *real* since the touch of matter that is governed by necessity is a touch of God. Weil explains this incapacity by pointing at their lack of true culture and the fact that no one tells them about it. The lack of finality – the misfortune of all human condition – appears too clearly in agricultural work.<sup>81</sup> Manual labour is either a degrading servitude for the soul or can become a sacrifice.<sup>82</sup> The challenge of society, of man, is to poetically transform the daily life of the labourer into a parable, in which the poor can see his priestly task. Indeed, Weil sees the similarity between the sacrifice of the priest and the one accomplished by the peasant. According to her, ‘the priest has the privilege of consecrating on the altar. But the peasant has a privilege that is no less sublime. His flesh and blood, sacrificed during the never ending hours of labour, going through wheat

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<sup>76</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 24.

<sup>77</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 178.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 161.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 19. The same lack of finality and hardship, of course, applied to industrial labourers, as Weil herself experienced it. Yet, it seems to be ‘easier’ to transform agricultural life into a biblical parable since the bible also uses an agrarian vocabulary. Besides, the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (JOC) was already active among young industrial workers, even during deportation, while a similar organisation for peasants seemed to have been absent.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

and vine become themselves the flesh and blood of Christ.<sup>83</sup> Weil explains that the peasant can just as well as the monk or nun reach perfection, if he is able to see that he produces flesh and blood for others by sacrificing his flesh and blood.<sup>84</sup> The poor, she says, need ‘poetry more than bread.’ They need ‘an eternal light’ and only religion can be the source of this poetry.<sup>85</sup> In the ‘Western white world’, Christianity is this source if it is to be incarnated in the daily life of the poor. The eternal light does not give a reason to live and work but gives such plenitude that the question of meaning or purpose does not even arise.<sup>86</sup>

Biblical language and metaphors, ceremonies and rituals are the means to transform the work of labourers into a beautiful poem. This is also what Weil calls a ‘spirituality of labour’.<sup>87</sup> She considered this ‘spirituality of labour’ as a powerful means of rooting man. She had concrete ideas of how the rites and rituals of the Church could be used outside, in the world of labourers, in order to create a new symbolic dimension. Instead of young children receiving their ‘Holy Communion’, Weil proposes another form of first communion that is much closer to the world of young peasants. There can be a special ceremony for young boys who are about to take the plough, to sacrifice their body, for the first time. The plough is to be blessed and consecrated to God.<sup>88</sup> All young peasants of this age ask for the grace of God to be able to serve Him and their neighbours. For such a ceremony, the priest is to read and explain the passages of the fields of lilies and ‘I am the bread of life.’<sup>89</sup> And of course, real bread and wine will be used for the Eucharist, whereby the farms are to be named and the whole household (masters and servants) of that farm will get the honour by occupying the front benches.<sup>90</sup> The aspects and worries of the life of labourers are to be integrated in the Sunday mass. For instance, this means asking for the blessing of works in progress. During the busy periods, the priest is to go to the fields to recite a prayer and the *pater noster* with the workers. The liturgy and daily language in general have to borrow metaphors from the agrarian world. The light of the sun is the image of the grace of God, of the ‘enlightenment of the Holy Spirit impregnating the soul.’<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>85</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 180.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 125.

<sup>88</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 26.

<sup>89</sup> Mt 6: 24-34; Mt 5: 44-48; Joh 6: 35, 48.

<sup>90</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 27. Weil considered honour to be a human need.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

The life of many workers – factory and agricultural – is characterised by monotony. And this is ‘bearable to man only through a divine enlightenment. [...] But this very reason means that a monotonous life is better for salvation.’<sup>92</sup> For Weil, the worker repeats the sacrifice of Christ, literally, in his body. He shares the Cross. Hence, Christianity can impregnate society only if each social category sees its unique relation with Christ. In other words, the factory worker needs to see the working man in Christ. All mothers are related to Christ ‘through the intermediary of the Virgin.’ All condemned ones can recognise their lot in the condemned Christ. Beggars can recognise themselves in the words ‘I was hungry....’<sup>93</sup> All should derive pride from the fact that so many aspects of their life are to be found back in the gospels.<sup>94</sup> However, such capacity to relate and to understand metaphors presupposes thinking and a certain sensitivity for symbolic language. How can that be – asks Weil – when one is a slave during the greatest part of the day?<sup>95</sup> Young workers – boys and girls – need to be educated, to be cultivated. She proposes a popular university where all workers would learn – in a Socratic manner – about the foundation of trades and crafts.<sup>96</sup> But most importantly, all instruction should have the aim of increasing the sensitivity to the beauty of the world, to the beauty of nature.<sup>97</sup> The manual labourer will then be able to love the universe that enters his flesh through labour. He will then be able to love the real – *necessity* – and realise his blessing. Suffering, and even misfortune, is the privilege of the poor since there is no truth or wisdom without suffering, says Weil. The rooted poor are provided with a ‘natural’ way of making the transition from the personal, their ‘I’ to the Impersonal (Beauty) through their obedience and patient endurance.

## V. The *metaxu* and the Impersonal

The only finality in this world is the beauty of the world and hence precious are the things if they are rungs towards the beauty of the world.<sup>98</sup> These things, the *metaxu* or intermediaries, carry a fragment of the universal beauty in themselves but they are not this beauty itself. The various intermediaries – for instance collectivities – are necessary to human beings, in the same

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 32; Mt 25: 35.

<sup>94</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 118.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>96</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 179.

<sup>97</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 115.

<sup>98</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 173. This bears a resemblance to the speech of Diotima, about the ‘ascent to absolute beauty,’ in Plato’s *Symposium*.

way that food is essential to human survival and well-being. They ensure the rooting of men. ‘Rooting is maybe the most important and the most unknown need of the human soul. [...] A human being has a root through his real, active and natural participation in the existence of a collectivity that preserves sure and certain living treasures of the past and presentiments of the future.’<sup>99</sup> This does imply that *metaxu* do not deserve more esteem than food. Only the universe deserves our unconditional love. The Stoic love for the universal city means that ‘the children of God should not have any other homeland (*patrie*) besides the universe itself, with the totality of reasonable creatures that it has contained, contains and will contain. That is the hometown that has the right to our love. The things smaller than the universe, among which the Church, impose far-reaching obligations, but no obligation to love.’<sup>100</sup> ‘One owes respect to a collectivity, whatever it may be – fatherland, family [...] not for itself, but as food for a certain number of human souls.’<sup>101</sup> This is why a collectivity should not be destroyed, since each collectivity is unique and cannot be replaced. The duty towards a collectivity might also mean total sacrifice if it is in danger. But this still does not imply that it is above a human being.<sup>102</sup>

The fear of social things, which collectivities are, prevails in Weil’s writings. Hence, there is a tension between her belief that the *metaxu* are necessary for the rooting of man and the fact that *metaxu* are social, of this world. The social is the domain of the devil, says Weil.<sup>103</sup> She refers to Satan who possesses all the kingdoms of the world and who offered them to Christ.<sup>104</sup> Yet, she cannot reject the city, the Greek polis. She, therefore, sometimes differentiates between the social and the *metaxu*. A city, for instance, ‘is not of the social; it is a human milieu of which one is as little conscious as the air one breathes. A contact with nature, the past, tradition; a *metaxu*.’<sup>105</sup> Cities are the reflections of the world city but the ‘more they resemble nations, the more they pretend to be fatherlands, the more they are deformed and soiled images.’<sup>106</sup> Indeed, the only homeland is the universe, and hence all cities deserve the same impartial ‘love’ or obligation, according to their status as intermediaries. Weil is afraid of a certain kind of

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<sup>99</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 79.

<sup>101</sup> Weil, *L’Enracinement*, p. 15.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16. This should not be misunderstood. Weil is no ‘humanist’. The reason for this remark is to make sure that the individual himself gives up his I. The collectivity also destroys the I, but this kind of annihilation is not the transition from the personal to the Impersonal.

<sup>103</sup> Simone Weil, *Cahiers II* (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 239.

<sup>104</sup> Mt 4: 8-9.

<sup>105</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 239.

<sup>106</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 174.

patriotism, one that favours one particular intermediary to another one. The Church, according to her, incites such a 'patriotism'. The 'saints have approved of crusades and the Inquisition. They have been blinded by something that is very powerful and that is the Church as social thing.'<sup>107</sup> According to Weil, it is inevitable that the Church be a social thing since this is a precondition for existence. Yet, as the social it belongs to the Prince of this world.<sup>108</sup> 'The flesh incites to say *me* and the devil incites to say *we*.'<sup>109</sup> The attribution of sacredness to any collectivity – people or nation – is therefore idolatry.

Man, as a gregarious creature (social being), is extremely vulnerable and easily influenced by collective things. And this has serious consequences for his relation with the supernatural. If one remembers that man only has the choice between evil and the supernatural good (grace), then the collective man chooses to bow down and worship the devil, in return for the comfort of a kingdom. This 'kingdom' can be an object to love and to die for, which gives meaning to one's existence. The collective man refuses the truth of human misery, that is, the lack of finality in this world. Weil stresses that 'all effort of mystics has always aimed at that there be no part in their soul that says 'I'. [...] But the part of the soul that says 'we' is infinitely more dangerous.'<sup>110</sup> The transition to the impersonal is impossible for someone who says 'we'. According to Weil, 'the personal is opposed to the impersonal, but there is passage from the one to the other. There is no passage from the collective to the impersonal.'<sup>111</sup> In other words, the collective, if it pretends to be more than food, takes the place – is the *ersatz* – of God. And, a degraded or sick collectivity that refuses to be reformed is no longer food, but poison for the ones who are rooted in it. The transition from the personal to the impersonal takes place through complete attention and requires solitude. 'Not only solitude in fact, but also moral solitude. It never happens in the one who thinks of himself as a member of a collectivity, as a part of a 'we'.'<sup>112</sup> Mediocre is the man who gives up his love to the non-good, a collectivity. The *we* has to dissolve into separate beings to enable the normal transition to the impersonal. It has to give back the *I* to each 'person' so that he or she can consent to giving up his or her *I* to God. The danger that the sacred collectivity poses can be compared to the one of extreme misfortune that uproots and destroys the *I* from outside, leaving nothing but egoism or a thing.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>110</sup> Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, p. 17.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

## Conclusion

‘A squirrel turning around in its cage and the rotation of the celestial sphere. Extreme misery and extreme grandeur’, says Weil.<sup>113</sup> Man and the universe, misery and beauty, *metaxu* and finality are the two poles in Weil’s thought. The one who can see himself as a squirrel that turns around in a round cage sees the truth. He sees the misery of being a creature and the lack of finality in everything in this world. The only finality is the beauty of the universe and man unconsciously seeks this beauty in the *metaxu*. Human creatures, also *metaxu*, carry a little bit of Impersonal beauty or purity in themselves and it is their task to consent to become nothing else than the Impersonal. In other words, they have to consent to de-create themselves, to reach the state of non-creation, the only pure good. ‘Nothing belongs to me except my misery. Nothing belongs to me, even my misery not; it belongs to the flesh,’ says Weil.<sup>114</sup> She seems to agree with the Hindu and Stoic philosophy that all individuals, through a kind of conflagration, become the One. The plurality of human beings – the various ‘persons’ or personalities – is in this sense, not real. Only the Impersonal is sacred and real. The transition from the personal to the impersonal is the duty of each human creature. But this can only take place if the person still has an *I*. An *I* that has been usurped by a collectivity or has been destroyed from outside cannot be given up. There is nothing to be given up. A rooted individual is one who experiences the *metaxu* (including collectivities) as means only, reserving his love for the universe. This presumes a love for providential necessity – the *amor fati* – that is the substance of this universe. Society has to be organised in such a way that individuals are provided with the necessary food or *metaxu* to become and remain rooted. This implies creating a poetic finality in human existence, so that questions about meanings and reasons become irrelevant. It is similar to a painting or a poem. Misfortune is simply part of a beautiful parable. A prerequisite for such a transformation of human existence is the cultivation of the sensitivity for the universal beauty. Then only will the poor realise their privilege of being so close to the Impersonal through their intimate contact with the indifferent necessity and matter ruled by necessity.

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<sup>113</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 179.

<sup>114</sup> Weil, *Cahiers I*, p. 201.



## Chapter III

### *En hupomone*

#### Introduction

Contradictions and a lack of finality are the signs of human misery. This consciousness makes human life unbearable since it implies that all the things to which man is attached are nothing else than means (*metaxu*) and hence do not deserve his love. It is therefore not surprising that man is rarely fully conscious of his condition and endows all the things that are dear to him with meanings. The love for the truth, for Weil, means that one desires to be conscious of the lack of finality in everything ‘down here’. She did realise that man cannot live without finality and hence saw the need of giving finality to social life, without giving it a meaning. Indeed, finality in social life implies that man does not even need to ask for reasons for why things are. The order of things is such that he is fully satiated. Religion, in particular Christianity, plays an important role in creating this ‘good’ order, as we saw in the previous chapter. The man who is satisfied with the order of things, with everything that happens and yet, who considers everything *in* the universe as nothing else than means, is the obedient servant who patiently waits for his (transcendent) Master. He does not move despite all the blows of misfortune. This *hupomone* is a key concept in Weil’s writings. It is an existential attitude that can be put into practice in the face of misfortune and the absence of God. The present chapter explicitly deals with Weil’s *hupomone*, by examining and reconstructing its constitutive concepts. Her *hupomone* can only be comprehended if one is aware of her conceived relationship between Creator and human creature. Following Plato, she argues that there is a great distance between man and God, between the order of necessity (need) and the Good. This (humanly) unbridgeable distance explains her other concepts of motionless attention, of evil and deliverance (purification) from evil. Purity, a recurrent theme in her thought, can be reached in the intellectual domain *and* in love. God needs to be loved with a pure love and this goes hand in hand with intellectual probity. Finally, Job, one of Weil’s ‘pure’ figures, the model of the unfortunate, is reread as one who adopts the most efficacious attitude when the blows of misfortune rain.

#### I. God and man: the Good and the non-good<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Cahiers III* (Paris: Plon, 1956), p. 127.

God, for Weil, is the Good before being what is.<sup>2</sup> Following Plato, she says that ‘[...] need is not a legitimate bond between man and God. As Plato says, there is a great distance between the nature of necessity and that of the good. God gives himself gratuitously and by way of addition, but man should not desire to receive.’<sup>3</sup> Evil belongs to the domain of necessity and this is opposed to the *supernatural* good. Hence, the distance between man and God is not a linear one that can eventually be covered but is one that separates two different kinds of order: the one of necessity and the transcendent order. God, the completely transcendent Good, is the one who descends towards the human creatures but man himself can only walk horizontally.<sup>4</sup> The only thing that man should desire is obedience, till the cross. Love implies obedience, and hence the one who disobeys does not love.<sup>5</sup> ‘The just relation with God is, in contemplation, love, in action, slavery.’<sup>6</sup> And love for God, the Good, for Weil, means the de-creation of the human creature, a non-good. God, being the Good, can love only Himself. And yet He created others besides Himself. Weil explains that ‘God not only loves himself through the creatures, which is but an extension of the love that he has directly for himself, but further he loves the creation through the [human] creatures. For this he needs them. He cannot love it otherwise.’<sup>7</sup> The creation is visible matter, other than the invisible, the *non-représentable* – God – and the human creature is a kind of vessel that stands between God and the creation. God can love ‘the visible world, and the soul of thinking beings in its natural part, but through the intermediary

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<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre Concernant l’Amour de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 49. See also chapter I, part V of this thesis. It is interesting to note the resemblance between Weil and Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius). Jan Aertsen points out that, for Dionysius, whose thought bears strong neo-platonist elements, the primary name of God is the Good and not Being. Jan Aertsen, ‘Eros is goddelijker dan agape: Dionysius Areopagita en Thomas van Aquino over de liefde,’ in R.A. te Velde (ed.), *Over liefde en liefde: beschouwingen over de liefde (amor, amicitia, caritas) volgens Thomas van Aquino* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 1998), p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil, *L’Enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 313. ‘By way of addition’ is the translation of ‘par surcroît.’

<sup>4</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 44; *Cahiers III*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948), p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Weil, *Cahiers II* (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 290. Note that God is able to love Himself directly without human creatures. The divine self-love through the creatures is just an extension of this love.

(mediation) of a creature having reached the state of perfection.<sup>8</sup> This creature becomes as transparent and empty as glass, letting God shine through as Light. Empty is the creature who has let grace work to destroy the I.<sup>9</sup> God does not penetrate into man and it is not given to man to embrace Him as an object of love. This is also the reason why man ought not to long for God.<sup>10</sup> Light does not stay into the glass but only passes through it.<sup>11</sup> Hence, 'I' and 'you' ought not to be used in the relationship between man and God. 'I' and 'you' separate men and 'forces them to climb further up.'<sup>12</sup> But of course, the creature who has reached perfection does not have any 'I' anymore. This intimate union is what is called the mystical union, of better said, assimilation or total incarnation.<sup>13</sup> Yet, it is not a union between 'persons.' As Weil notes, 'it is not the person who is involved, but something else. And this other thing is turned towards something else than a person, necessarily.'<sup>14</sup>

Death is the ultimate destruction of the creature, through which the sacred Impersonal can be separated from matter.<sup>15</sup> Hence, those who desire *personal* salvation do not really believe

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. The argument that God 'needs' human creatures to love the visible creation does not seem to be a consistent one in Weil's writings. In the end, whatever may be the divine motive for creation, de-creation is the aim, so that God may be left alone with the universe, His 'Body'. Elsewhere (see, for instance, chapter II), Weil writes that 'when I am somewhere, I soil the silence of heaven and of earth through my breathing and my heartbeat.' Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 50. Or, men 'participate in the creation of the world by de-creating' themselves, leaving God alone with his beautiful universe.' Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 289.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *L'Enracinement*, p. 313.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to compare this perspective with that of Anders Nygren. According to Thomas Oord, Nygren likens creatures to tubes that pass genuine love received from above to others below. Thomas Jay Oord, 'A Relational God and Unlimited Love,' in Craig A. Boyd (ed.), *Visions of Agapé: problems and possibilities in human and divine love* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> 'Union' (or communion) presumes two 'persons' but if the I has disappeared, it is difficult to see how one can speak of a union between two.

<sup>14</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 52. See previous note. One can say that there is a kind of assimilation of the good in man into the Impersonal God. Only the good is related to the Good, and hence, what is left after the annihilation of the I is the Good.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the sacred Impersonal, see chapter II, part I of the thesis.

in the reality of the joy in God.<sup>16</sup> ‘Joy in God’, in Weil’s thought, is a particular concept. It is ‘the plenitude of the sentiment of the real.’<sup>17</sup> Real is the invisible reality, the non-created Good. The creature does not add anything to this ‘joy’ and should be indifferent as to whether he will participate in this joy or not. ‘The belief in immortality is harmful, [...] is in fact the belief in the extension of life, and hence removes the usage of death.’<sup>18</sup> The function of death is precisely to de-create the creature, while eternal salvation or immortality – in the Christian sense – still allows others besides God to exist. Through death, ‘man is made matter and consumed by God.’<sup>19</sup> While waiting for this final consumption, man can choose to become perfectly obedient human matter. Weil even stresses that a ‘creature cannot not obey.’<sup>20</sup> The only choice offered to him is to *desire* obedience or not to desire it. In other words, man can love or refuse his love to God. If man does not desire obedience, ‘he obeys nevertheless, perpetually, as a thing subjected to mechanical necessity. If he desires, he remains subjected to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity is added, a necessity constituted by laws peculiar to supernatural things. Certain actions become impossible; others are executed nearly in spite of him.’<sup>21</sup> Mechanical necessity is, for Weil, nothing else than the will of God. All events that do not depend on us – past, present and future – in the universe, are the will of God, without any exception. The one who desires obedience loves everything, including evil in all its forms. ‘That includes one’s sins if they belong to the past (one has to hate them if the roots are still present), one’s own sufferings, past, present and to come. And what is much difficult, the sufferings of other men, for so far that we are not called to relieve them.’<sup>22</sup> The one who refuses to obey, to love necessity, still

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<sup>16</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43. This is not a form of union with God in the Christian sense. Fire consumes (the Hindu ritual of cremation means much more than a disposal of the dead body) and in the same sense, God consumes. As I remarked above (notes 13 and 14), union presumes two parties while assimilation is a more appropriate word if the good disappears into the Good.

<sup>20</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 113. As Christopher Hamilton remarks, in this picture, there seems to be no room for freedom, for, ‘the person in such a case has no real freedom, since he is subject to mechanical necessity which, so to speak, works through him as God’s will requires.’ Christopher Hamilton, ‘Power, Punishment and Reconciliation in the Political and Social Thought of Simone Weil,’ *European Journal of Social Theory* 11 (3) (2008): 315-330 (p. 320).

<sup>21</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

experiences it in his flesh and soul and is the one who generally becomes uprooted. He is the one who loses his 'I' through circumstances, becoming an egoist without an 'I'.

There is a domain where events do depend on human choice and actions that accomplish 'determined and finite ends.'<sup>23</sup> Obedience, in this case, means doing one's duty or what appears to be a duty. If duty is unclear, then one 'has to observe rules that are more or less arbitrarily chosen but fixed, or follow one's inclination but within limits.'<sup>24</sup> Weil remarks that the most beautiful life would be one in which there would be no room for choice, through the constraint of necessity or direct constraint from God.<sup>25</sup> This would be the situation where the will of God reigns. Hence, it is a privilege to be constrained to do the will of God. 'God rewards the soul who thinks of him with attention and love, and he rewards her by exercising on her a constraint that is rigorously, mathematically proportional to this attention and love.'<sup>26</sup> The one whose whole soul is under constraint, is in a state of perfection, is the perfectly obedient clay in the Hands of the Maker. However, it is clay that can still act and hence, one has to make sure that one 'never accomplish[es] more than that to which one is irresistibly pushed, not even in view of the good.'<sup>27</sup> This last remark can be better understood by stressing that Weil thought that one cannot *will* to accomplish the good since necessity and the transcendent good belong to different orders. One accomplishes the genuine good under divine constraint, nearly in spite of oneself (the me). Therefore, the accomplishment of the good as a matter choice, without divine constraint, can only be an illusion. There are different states of perfection, although perfection grows exponentially in the one whose eyes are turned towards God. The question that arises is how to discern the will of God or more precisely, the thrust of grace. The answer of Weil is particularly interesting when one knows that she remarks that the believer runs the risk of attributing to grace what is simply an effect of the essentially mechanical nature (such as natural talents).<sup>28</sup> A call of grace is characterised by an 'impulse that is essentially and manifestly different from those that proceed from sensibility or reason' and that may even demand impossibilities.<sup>29</sup> In order to hear such a call, one has to make silence in oneself, to still 'all desires, all opinions and [think] 'may your will be done.'<sup>30</sup> The very fact that one *desires* such

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 38.

<sup>30</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 54.

obedience is, for Weil, much more important than the question of right or error. Hence, what one feels without uncertainty to have to do, even if it might be a mistake from a certain perspective, is the will of God.<sup>31</sup> This does not seem to make it any easier for the believer to distinguish between supernatural grace and mechanical necessity.

## II. The patience of matter: motionless attention

‘The beautiful is the necessary that, while remaining conform to its own law and only to it, obeys the good.’<sup>32</sup> In other words, what is necessary is beautiful since it obeys the law of necessity, a reflection of God’s perfection. Matter is characterised by passive obedience and the absence of intention or discrimination. It can only obey necessity. Weil asserts that ‘Christ has proposed to us as model the docility of matter by advising us to look at the lilies of the fields, that do not work nor spin.’<sup>33</sup> By becoming matter, one would obey necessity and hence the Good. For Weil, this imitation of the universe or the beauty of the universe is made possible by motionless attention. An action is passive if one acts not for the object, but through a necessity.<sup>34</sup> As we noted above, the good can only be accomplished under divine constraint, and is not an act of the will (of the mediocre human creature, the non-good). ‘There is only waiting [*attente*], attention, silence, immobility in suffering and joy,’ says Weil.<sup>35</sup> As I mentioned in the previous chapter, she seems to have agreed with certain aspects of Hindu philosophy and here as well, she says that ‘this kind of passive activity, the highest of all, is perfectly described in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and in Lao-Tzu.’<sup>36</sup> Perfection or beauty, for her, lies not in (great) moral deeds but in this effort of non-action. Attention is indeed an effort, ‘the greatest of all efforts maybe, but it is a negative effort.’<sup>37</sup> Weil argues that it is the mediocrity of man which *wills* the good and loathes the passive *contemplation* of the good. ‘The effort of the will towards the good is one of the lies secreted by the mediocre part of ourselves in the fear of being destroyed [...] For,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 149. The original French text is: ‘Le beau est le nécessaire, qui, tout en demeurant conforme à sa loi propre et à elle seule, obéit au bien.’

<sup>33</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 190.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Lao-Tzu is considered to be the father (or one of the fathers) of Taoism. Lao-Tzu thought that it was man and his activities which constituted a blight on the otherwise perfect order of things.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

the mediocre part of ourselves does not fear fatigue and suffering, it fears to be killed.’<sup>38</sup> Weil points out how man is able to give up pleasure and bear pain for a visible social collectivity but is unable to do so for the (invisible) God in heaven. She believes that it is easier to die for what is powerful but not for what is weak.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, according to her, it was difficult to be faithful to the weak Christ but it was easier to be faithful to the Church with its aureole of power. By devoting himself to a social collectivity, man is able to say ‘we’ and hence feels that he is someone (valuable). Opting for God, on the other hand, means desiring the death of the ‘I’. It means being conscious that one is nothing, since only the Good is real. The mediocre part of the soul – nearly the whole of it – tries to hide itself from God behind the screen of the flesh. To combat this mediocrity, one does not need to use violence against oneself but one only needs to consider that part ‘as a stranger and enemy.’<sup>40</sup> If one recalls that, for Weil, the misery of man is his very existence, then it can be understood that non-existence is actually a good.

The good cannot be reached by any effort, but the only thing that can be done is to dispose ‘our soul to receive grace, and the energy that is needed for this effort is provided to us by grace.’<sup>41</sup> Salvation – perfect obedience or the destruction of the I – is not reached through the power of the will. The will that Weil compares to muscular effort, is useful to purge oneself of imperfections (weeds) that are a matter of a will and effort.<sup>42</sup> She compares the will to the effort that the peasant makes when he gets rid of weeds. It is a negative effort since it is, according to her, not the peasant but the sun and water that make wheat grow. The will of the human creature

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 190-1.

<sup>39</sup> This statement seems above all to apply to the relation between man and a greater whole, and not really to the relation between individuals. One might retort that Christ was a man. This he was indeed, but he represented a greater entity (way of life for example), and that made him weak. Weil’s rule, if applied to individuals, would disregard human pity, compassion and motherly (parental) love. The need to protect what is weak is also part of ‘human nature’.

<sup>40</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 40. This kind of ‘dualism’ can be found in other writings of Weil. For instance, ‘The practice of reciting the Our Father in Greek, every morning with an absolute attention, absolutely pure. [...] Sometimes the first words already snatch my thought out of my body and carry her in a place outside space where there is no perspective and no point of view.’ *Attente de Dieu*, p. 48; Or, ‘To conceive misfortune, one needs to carry it in one’s flesh, driven in, like a nail, and to carry it a long time, so that the mind has had time to become strong enough to look at it. To look at it from outside, having been able to come out of the body, and even, in a sense, out of the soul.’ *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 336.

– in the order of necessity – is incapable of willing the good of the transcendent order. But it can fight against natural imperfections such as certain desires and tendencies. Weil stresses that one cannot climb up through one's 'good deeds.' It is desire that saves.<sup>43</sup> 'Efforts of the will are proper only for the accomplishment of strict obligations. Everywhere where there is no strict obligation, one needs to follow either natural inclination, or the call that is the commandment of God.'<sup>44</sup> The attitude that operates salvation, for Weil, is the right disposition of the soul, whereby one's eyes are perpetually turned in the direction that God gives to them. Watchful attention consists in that 'the mind must be empty, waiting, must seek nothing, but has to be ready to receive, in its naked truth, the object that will penetrate it.'<sup>45</sup> According to Weil, faith, for St. Paul, 'is the sight of invisible things. At this moment of attention, faith is present as well as love.'<sup>46</sup> Love sees the invisible. It sees what does not exist. And God is other than existence, being the *non-représentable*.<sup>47</sup> Neither does humanity exist 'in the anonymous and lifeless flesh on the side of the road.' *En hupomone* is the Samaritan who stops and sees it and acts accordingly.<sup>48</sup> His attitude and actions are not to be characterised as ethical or moral acts. Weil considers ethics and morality as being products of the will. The Samaritan passively allows God to act through him, and therefore it is not he who acts but God. He represents the one who has reached a certain degree of perfection and who therefore acts under divine constraint.

Waiting, looking and listening to the silence constitute the right attitude towards the good. What one certainly should not do, says Weil, is to seek God. Man does not have any means to cover the huge non-linear distance separating him down here and God up there in Heaven. She stresses the danger of running in various directions, of getting lost or of finding false goods. God comes and gets the soul 'who refuses his love to all that is other than God. This refusal does not presume any belief.'<sup>49</sup> The man who motionlessly waits does not need to know what he waits for, but one day God comes the whole way down to him. According to Weil, 'the one who seeks hinders this operation of God more than he helps it.'<sup>50</sup> The reason for this is that seeking is active and no good can spring from the active activity of a mediocre creature. Attentively waiting is the best attitude that also characterises the one who waits for the

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<sup>43</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 191.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>47</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 285.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 136.

<sup>49</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 42.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.



solution to a geometrical problem that suddenly appears in his mind.<sup>51</sup> He refuses to give his love to all that passes and moves away from evil. The man *en hupomone* only needs to consider the *metaxu* as means, as the becoming, as that what passes and reserves his love for the invisible God (and the visible universe). The question that Weil implicitly asks (and answers) is how to *love* an impersonal, invisible, *non-représentable* something. She notes that ‘love always bears a relationship to the body and God does not have any other body offered to our senses except the universe itself.’<sup>52</sup> The beautiful universe is indeed intimately related to God since it directly bears His will through necessity. The universe, as we have seen earlier, governed by necessity, is a touch of God and needs to be loved.<sup>53</sup> Anything else, for Weil, is bound to be a false good. Illusions are ‘states of the soul, sources of perceptible joys, of hope, of comfort, of consolation or of reassurance, or else a whole of habits, or else one or more human beings, or else a social milieu.’<sup>54</sup> These are veils between man and God, which are confused for the good because one does not have the patience to let supernatural attention grow. Attention and desire force God to descend. He comes only to those who ask him to come; and those who ask often, long and ardently. This does not mean that these individuals actually long for *God* but they are the ones who refuse their love to all that is not God, even if they do not use the notion ‘God’.

### III. Deliverance from evil: attention as lever

‘Evil needs to be made pure – or life is not possible. Only God can do so.’<sup>55</sup> Only the purifying Fire can destroy evil. For Weil, the bronze snake and the Cross save. This is the paradox of salvation since the very things that destroy save. ‘The contemplation of human misery is the only source of supernatural felicity.’<sup>56</sup> She refers quite often to the biblical story of the poisonous snakes. According to Numbers, ‘Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away

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<sup>51</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 193.

<sup>52</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 277.

<sup>53</sup> See, in chapter I of the thesis, how misfortune caused by matter, is a touch of God. In chapter II, part IV, I show how (and why) the poor are blessed, in Weil’s view. The poor, whose body is crushed by a whole day work, ‘carries in his flesh, like a thorn, the reality of the universe.’ Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 161.

<sup>54</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 194.

<sup>55</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 83.

<sup>56</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 140.

from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.’<sup>57</sup> Hence, the contemplation of one’s nothingness is what eventually leads to the annihilation of one’s I (the evil in oneself). Neither pain nor the misery of the creature is an evil, says Weil.<sup>58</sup> Evil is the ugliness in us. It is the root common to suffering and sin, which is neither the one nor the other, an indistinct mixture of the two.<sup>59</sup> It is the pain and stain of being a creature, of existing. Man propagates the evil that is within him outside, creating suffering and sin. ‘The soul rejects [evil] like one vomits. It transfers it [...] in the things that surround it. But things having become ugly and soiled in our eyes, return to us the evil that we have put in them.’<sup>60</sup> There would be no end to such an exponential increase if there were no counterweight or lever. This is what Weil means when she says that life is not possible if evil cannot be made pure. The antidotes to evil are the sources of purity, such as the beauty of the universe, religion, art, friendship and love. They act as a lever that lifts up what is pulled down by gravity.

Similarly, the Cross is a lever, the descending movement that is a condition for the ascending movement towards God.<sup>61</sup> ‘Through attention and desire we carry a part of our evil onto a thing that is perfectly pure, it cannot be soiled; it remains pure; it does not return us this evil; in this way we are delivered from evil.’<sup>62</sup> By looking at the Lamb of God, the evil in us undergoes a process of transmutation, separating sin from suffering.<sup>63</sup> Weil considers religious practices such as contemplation and recitations to be ‘entirely constituted by attention animated by desire.’<sup>64</sup> The statement that contemplation or looking at something pure actually delivers one from evil might seem strange or even simplistic. This transformation can be understood by recalling Weil’s concepts of evil and deliverance (or purification). Evil is the ‘I’ or the mediocre part in the being that can be *almost* the whole of the human creature, though it can never be equal to the being since there would then be no space for the sacred Impersonal. Purification therefore means the annihilation of the ‘I’ and this, according to Weil can be achieved through

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<sup>57</sup> Num 21: 6-9.

<sup>58</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 170.

<sup>59</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 185.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Weil, *Cahiers III*, p. 221.

<sup>62</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 15.

<sup>63</sup> Compare with ‘Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.’ Joh 3: 14-15.

<sup>64</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 194.

contemplation and recitation. ‘The just relation with God is, in contemplation, love, in action, slavery.’<sup>65</sup> Love for God, however, is the desire for one’s own de-creation so that God may love himself through the creature who has reached a certain degree of perfection. It is this desire that makes the Weilian attention (or contemplation) ‘effective’ in destroying the mediocre part of the being. Giving full, absolute attention to something, to someone, can be considered as a great effort since the one who does so gives ‘himself’ to the other.<sup>66</sup> For Weil, it is indeed the greatest of all efforts and yet it is more giving oneself. The consciousness of one’s own nothingness and the desire to give up one’s existence to God – de-creation – somehow do annihilate the ‘I’.<sup>67</sup> ‘The part of evil contained in the soul that has been burnt through the fire of [the contact with perfect purity] becomes only suffering, and suffering impregnated with love.’<sup>68</sup> The one without sin suffers without spreading evil outside himself, without hate and revolt. In this way, human life is bearable since evil does not propagate itself endlessly.

Sources of purity are to be found everywhere in the world, at all times and it is by looking at them that one is saved, like the Israelites were saved from the bites of the snakes. The universe of the beauty, sacred objects and texts of different religions are such sources, acting like a lever and hence prevent everything from being tarnished. Therefore, the type of religion in which one finds oneself does not matter too much. Weil even thinks that a change of religion is not good for the soul, just as a writer’s thought and style are degraded in a foreign language. In the end, every religion is just food and it is only in case of real big imperfections – such as corruption or circumstances that have killed the love for this religion – that it is legitimate or necessary to adopt a new one.<sup>69</sup> A religion has to be evaluated according to the criterion as to whether it can *recite* the name of the Lord correctly. This correct recitation presumes the ‘right’ concepts of God and man, namely God as non-acting, transcendent Good and man as a non-good who does the least harm by not being too active. Then only can we understand Weil’s

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<sup>65</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 57.

<sup>66</sup> This is not equivalent to self-annihilation, since being absolutely present for the other does not (necessarily) mean losing oneself.

<sup>67</sup> It nearly resembles a psychological process of self-denial and self-hate. Whether this is the case cannot be explored in the thesis, but is certainly a relevant question. In general, the continuous *recitation* of significant words (for instance mantras) creates a somewhat hypnotic effect, and in extreme cases a state of trance. It is interesting to note that Weil, in this case, does not seem to have seen the need to distinguish between psychological or even pathological (hence natural) effects and the effects of grace.

<sup>68</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 187.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

remark that the Roman and Jewish religions are examples of ones that are inapt of reciting correctly. ‘God is absent; He is in heaven. His name is the only possibility for man to have access to him’, says Weil.<sup>70</sup> The Roman and Jewish religions, in her thinking, fail to see divine action as non-acting and the unbridgeable distance between man and God. Weil considers the Hindu and Buddhist traditions as embodying the knowledge that the recitation of the name of God is the only human access to God. ‘The virtue of religious practices can be conceived wholly according to the Buddhist tradition concerning the recitation of the name of the Lord. One tells that the Buddha made the vow to raise to him, in the Land of Purity, all those who would recite his name with the desire to be saved by him.’<sup>71</sup> She sees all religious practices and liturgy as a form of recitation of the name of the Lord. All these have in principle the ‘virtue to save whoever devotes himself to it with this desire.’<sup>72</sup> Weil considers the practice of reciting the *pater noster* in Greek, every morning with absolute attention as particularly purifying. ‘The words of the *Pater noster* are perfectly pure.’<sup>73</sup> The mind who devotes all attention to these words is taken by God to ‘a place outside space where there is no perspective and no point of view.’<sup>74</sup> Anyone, says Weil, can be purified; can reach this realm of Truth and Beauty, since this complete, absolute attention can be learnt. The less-gifted pupil who patiently perseveres in trying to solve a geometrical puzzle cultivates this attention and by doing so, is automatically purified. Prayer is nothing else than the highest form of attention. ‘It is the orientation towards God with all the attention of which the soul is capable. [...] Only the highest part of attention comes into contact with God, when prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be reached.’<sup>75</sup> Prayer is also the criterion of good and evil. According to Weil, it is impossible to

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 15.

<sup>74</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 48.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 85. Hence, for Weil, prayer explicitly excludes asking God for natural bread, since ‘it is up to blind necessity to provide it or to refuse it in conformity to chance’; ‘asking him to intervene in the domain reserved to the will of the creature’; ‘to desire social prestige, which belongs to the devil.’ Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 312; Also, ‘[...] once we have understood that we are nothing, the aim of all efforts is to become nothing. It is to this end that one suffers with acceptance, *it is to this end that one acts*, it is to this end that one prays.’ *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 43.

harm someone when one acts in a state of *true* prayer.<sup>76</sup> In such a state of genuine prayer, man only acts under divine constraint and does not actively do anything but simply obeys.

#### IV. The pure knowledge of God

‘There are two atheisms of which one is the purification of the notion of God. [...] Of two men who do not have the experience of God, the one who denies Him is perhaps closer to Him,’ says Weil.<sup>77</sup> The one who has not been taken by God, who has had no experience of God, according to her, cannot be said to have faith. The believer who, in spite of this, claims to love God can only love an imaginary God or with an imaginary love. She asserts that it does not depend on a soul to believe in the reality of God if God does not reveal this reality. The only duty that one has is to wait till God comes to seize the soul. The one who searches and who thinks that he has found God most probably loves an abstract God or an idol.<sup>78</sup> Weil’s *hupomone* implies an absolute love for the truth and hence the refusal to love anything that is not God. God comes to the one who persists in refusing his love to things that are not God. When he is taken by God, he will have the certitude of an incontestable reality. Yet, this does not mean that he is thereafter incapable of doubting. ‘The human mind always has the capacity and duty to doubt.’<sup>79</sup> Doubt and the love for truth are inseparable. According to Weil, prolonged doubt destroys the illusionary certitude of uncertain things and confirms the certitude of things that are certain. ‘Doubt concerning the reality of God is an abstract and verbal doubt for whoever has been seized by God, much more abstract and verbal than the doubt concerning the reality of perceptible things; whenever such a doubt arises, it suffices to receive it without any restriction to experience how abstract and verbal it is.’<sup>80</sup> Incredulity, hence, can purify the notion of God and become the modern equivalent of the dark night of John of the Cross.<sup>81</sup>

Incredulity loves God if it is ‘like the child who does not know whether there is bread somewhere, but who cries that he is hungry.’<sup>82</sup> It is one that refuses all consolations and all imaginary goods. Real is human misery, human life that is full of contradictions. ‘Everything that we want is contradictory with the conditions or consequences that are attached to it.

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<sup>76</sup> Weil, *Cahiers III*, p. 143.

<sup>77</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 116.

<sup>78</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 211.

<sup>79</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 44.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 211.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

[...]Only contradiction makes us experience that we are not all. Contradiction is our misery, and the sentiment of our misery is the sentiment of reality. For, our misery, we do not fabricate it. It is real. That is why one needs to cherish it. All the rest is imaginary.’<sup>83</sup> It does not mean that all the perceptible things do not exist. They are unreal as goods.<sup>84</sup> They are *metaxu*, belong to the domain of the becoming (*devenir*) and pull us towards the *non-représentable*.<sup>85</sup> For Weil, human existence is the cave of Plato, a shadow of reality.<sup>86</sup> The hidden, on the other hand, is more real than the manifest, and this all along the ladder from the least to the most hidden.<sup>87</sup> The completely, absolutely hidden and hence Real is God. God, as far as He exists, is the universe of the phenomena. Some realities are more or less transparent, while others are opaque but behind all of them there is God.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, God, as being other than the universe, is other than existence.<sup>89</sup> In this sense, He is Nothingness, Void or the *non-représentable*. God as nothing or void is different from the nothingness of the creature, of the contingent or of what passes. There are two voids, ‘that of above and that of below,’ corresponding to the two separate orders, the one of necessity and that of the supernatural.<sup>90</sup> But how can one love any kind of void whatsoever? The body of God – the universe – can be loved through the *amor fati*, ‘an experimental proof of the reality of God.’<sup>91</sup> What seems more difficult is to love God as Non-Existence, as the *non-représentable*.

Even the void can be an illusion. How can one distinguish between the Real Void and an illusionary one? It is therefore not surprising that Weil, for whom intellectual probity is never too much, questions the reality of the real love for God. ‘What I call real love of God, is it not simply imaginary, of second order re-qualified, transformed by dint of intensity into imaginary of first order?’<sup>92</sup> She experiences this as a horrible thought but faithful to her love for the truth, she says that one needs to contemplate it and love it in its horror, just as one is meant to love the crude touch of fate. This kind of doubt is a suffering, and since Weil embraces the adage ‘*toi pathai mathos*,’ – that is, through suffering teaching (knowledge) or one needs to suffer to

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<sup>83</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 407.

<sup>84</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 58.

<sup>85</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 142.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>88</sup> In other words, the universe is the ‘body’ of the invisible God.

<sup>89</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 285.

<sup>90</sup> Weil, *Cahiers III*, p. 79.

<sup>91</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 155.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

receive wisdom – even this tormenting thought is one that leads to Wisdom.<sup>93</sup> The path to faith via atheism is ‘not to believe in the immortality of the soul, but to consider life as meant to prepare the instant of death; not to believe in God, but to love the universe, always, even in the anguish of suffering, like a fatherland.’<sup>94</sup> Hence, the criterion, in the spiritual domain, for distinguishing between the imaginary and the real is to prefer ‘real hell to the imaginary paradise.’<sup>95</sup> Necessity, the touch of God in this world, is real and is a sign of the infinite and timeless mercy of God. One needs to recall Weil’s quite unusual idea of the presence of God, which is that God is present through his absence. It is the mercy of God to be absent, to allow necessity to rule since this is the precondition for the existence of the creature. Mercy cannot be simply deduced from nature but can be felt in the mystical union with (or incarnation of) God. Hence, Weil saw it as her duty or calling to ‘have of divine mercy a conception that does efface itself, that does not change, whatever be the event that fate sends on me, and that can be communicated to any human being.’<sup>96</sup>

#### **V. Job *en hupomone***

‘Ulcers and manure were required for the beauty of the world to be revealed to Job’, says Weil.<sup>97</sup> For her, Job is not so much a historical man as a figure of Christ.<sup>98</sup> The book Job is, according to her, a pure wonder of truth and authenticity.<sup>99</sup> Weil points out that Job could only see the beauty of the world after the veil of flesh had been destroyed by misfortune. Then only could he see that necessity is the substance of the universe while the substance of necessity is the obedience to the perfectly wise Love.<sup>100</sup> The ordeal of Job is the purifying dark night in which God seems to be absent, ‘more absent than a dead, more absent than the light in a completely dark cell. A sort of horror submerges the whole soul. What is terrible, is that if, in

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 410.

<sup>94</sup> Weil, *Cahiers III*, p. 88.

<sup>95</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 60.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>98</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 101. Weil does not see Jesus of Nazareth as the only Christ or Mediator of God. Unlike the impression given by Eric Springsted, Jesus Christ is not the only Mediator. See Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (California: Scholars Press Chico, 1983), p. 137.

<sup>99</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 102.

<sup>100</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 112.

this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, the absence of God becomes definitive. The soul has to continue to love in void, or at least to want to love, be it with an infinitesimal part of itself.<sup>101</sup> Job is the model of the unfortunate. He, who loses everything to which he was attached but cannot die, is not a martyr, but is the unfortunate who can only cry out ‘why’, just as Christ cried ‘my God, my God, why did you abandon me?’ It is the authentic cry of the innocent who can hardly understand what is happening to him. Job does not do much besides sitting in the ashes and later on, cursing the day he was born. He passively undergoes the blows of the non-intentional necessity, one after the other and does not let himself be convinced by the arguments of his friends who try to find reasons for his lot. In the end, God does show himself to Job, reminding him of his nothingness. But God only comes to the one who accepts the void – to become the empty glass – and maintains this emptiness created by misfortune unfilled.

Weil explains how grace can only enter where there is a void to receive it.<sup>102</sup> It is natural to seek consolation, a kind of reward to compensate the pain that one suffers. ‘But if, resisting this necessity [of a reward], one leaves a void, it is as if an in-draught takes place, and a supernatural reward comes. It only comes where there is a void.’<sup>103</sup> The soul must desire to become nothing, to become so empty or transparent that God can love Himself through it. In other words, the creature must love truth (literally) to death.<sup>104</sup> Weil notes that there are two ways to kill oneself, namely suicide and detachment. Detachment is to ‘kill by thought all that one loves: the only way to die. But only what one loves.’<sup>105</sup> This prevents the void from being filled by the false reality of the exterior world (*ersatz*) which attachment produces.<sup>106</sup> Misfortune without consolation helps to attain total detachment that is, the true reality. ‘The extinction of desire (Buddhism) – or detachment – or the *amor fati* – or the desire of the absolute good, this is always the same thing: to empty desire, finality of all content, to desire in void, to desire without wish.’<sup>107</sup> In agreement with some streams of Buddhist and Christian mystical thought, Weil asserts that the ‘good is for us nothingness [*néant*] since nothing is good. But this

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<sup>101</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 103.

<sup>102</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 20.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25. Weil refers to Luke 14: 26: ‘If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.’

<sup>106</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 264.

<sup>107</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 23.



nothingness is not unreal. All that exists, compared to it, is unreal.<sup>108</sup> As said above, Nothingness or the void, for Weil, is God since God is other than existence. Detachment implies setting aside all beliefs that soften bitterness and offer hope, such as immortality and the providential order of events, '[...] in short the consolations that one usually seeks in religion.'<sup>109</sup> 'Attachment is a maker of illusions, and whoever wants the real must be detached.'<sup>110</sup>

According to Weil, 'the void is the supreme plenitude, but man does not have the right to know it. [...] Even Christ did not know it at a certain moment.'<sup>111</sup> Indeed, Christ thought that God had abandoned him in total darkness. There is an experience of the absence of God. There is despair. God 'retires in order not to be loved like the treasure of the miser', says Weil.<sup>112</sup> The experience of the absence of God is real and this is why the dark night purifies and completely detaches to lead towards the plenitude of the void. However, the poor unfortunate who is in the grip of misfortune cannot know this, just as Job did not. The only thing that such a creature can do is to continue to want to love (or in the case of Job, to fear God). Weil says that this is not impossible and even not difficult since the 'greatest pain does not touch the point in the soul that consents to a good orientation.'<sup>113</sup> The only thing that cannot be harmed or touched by misfortune (necessity) is the Good. Hence, this 'point' in the soul that makes the difference between the human creature and the mediocre part of the creature, is the sacred Impersonal.<sup>114</sup> Love, Weil explains, is not a state of the soul but an orientation, that is, the direction of one's eyes or attention. It is contemplation. The one who is crushed by misfortune and incapable of any feeling, thought or action experiences an opaque screen between the light (Light) and himself. But by maintaining his eyes turned towards God, without ever moving and by

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>113</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 120.

<sup>114</sup> Weil's reasoning does raise questions and a lot remains unclear. If the I is destroyed by misfortune, and that the only thing that remains is the sacred impersonal, or a point in the soul, then *who* continues to love? *Who* 'experiences' joy or light? Does the sacred impersonal in an individual carry something of the individual in itself or is related to it in some ways? Otherwise it is difficult to see how the unfortunate being can eventually experience grace, if that which makes the human creature who he is, is destroyed. Perhaps these questions can be indirectly answered by examining more closely Weil's concept of love. See the next chapter.

unceasingly asking for bread, God is nearly forced to come down to meet him.<sup>115</sup> Job, the God-fearing man, did not move from the ashes and persistently cried out his innocence and his incomprehension.<sup>116</sup> He actually adopted the most efficacious attitude, by doing nothing but mourning without accepting consolation or explanation. What he also did not do is to transform his suffering into sin or crime by cursing God and spreading evil around him to fill the void in himself.<sup>117</sup> He imitated the patience of the matter, *en hupomone*.

## Conclusion

Weil believes that the man who desires bread does not get stone if he unceasingly screams for it. Attentively waiting and calling the name of the Lord are the expressions (and duties) of the human love for God. Man should not seek God since the distance that separates him from the transcendent Good cannot be humanly covered. The orders of necessity and of supernatural grace are the two scales of the balance that ensures that human life does not become unbearable through an infinite growth of evil. But these two orders do not share anything in common. As a result, the human creature does not have the capacity to cover the vertical distance between him and God. He can only find a false God in his natural order and become satisfied with idols, such as social collectivities. Neither does he *need* to search for God. The only thing that he needs to do is to motionlessly and attentively wait for His Master. But this contemplation is not passivity. On the contrary, it is a process of purification, of the annihilation of the 'I'. Then only can God come down to incarnate himself, to love himself through the creature without an I. Indeed, God can love only himself and he continues doing so through the creature who has become nothing or transparent. The creature who realises that he is a non-good, loves the Good and can only wish to disappear. He can only desire to become obedient human matter. He is the one *en hupomone*, who only acts under divine constraint similarly to matter that obeys the natural necessity. The essential difference is that this being obeys the *supernatural* constraint that belongs to the order of grace, *explicitly* allowing God to love Himself. This human creature has given up his existence out of love for God. Such a man is able to love every single event, every single misfortune without consolation and in spite of the bitterness. He loves God with a real and pure love since his love does not depend on the state of his soul anymore. Job is a pure wonder of authenticity, for Weil, precisely because he is able to say 'surely I spoke of things I

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<sup>115</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 37.

<sup>116</sup> Job 2: 9.

<sup>117</sup> Weil, *Cahiers III*, p. 319. This would have been in conformity with the natural mechanism.

did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. [...] Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.’<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Job 42: 1-6.

## Chapter IV

### Unnecessary burdens: the problems with Weil's concept of Love

#### Introduction

Christopher Hamilton, in his article on Weil's 'Human Personality', notes that 'those who are attracted by Weil's writings tend to read her on her own terms, which leaves one with a sense that the hardest questions have not been put to her, and that the difficulties of her work have not been fully brought to the surface.'<sup>1</sup> He further refers to Philippe Dujardin who has suggested that there is a tendency towards hagiography in writings on Weil. I agree with these remarks and hence, do wish, in the present chapter, to approach some of the difficulties that Weil's ideas raise. In the previous chapters, I presented a number of core concepts in her writings, as much as possible 'on her own terms' since this is, I believe, the only way to do justice to someone's thought. While I have previously merely touched upon possible questions that certain claims of Weil may raise, I will now discuss them more thoroughly. In chapter III, I reconstructed the constitutive elements of Weil's concept of *hupomone* and it might already have appeared that the latter diverges from the biblical concept of *hupomone*. Indeed, despite the fact that Weil refers to biblical passages to explain what *hupomone* is, I will show that her understanding of this concept actually negates some central concepts of Christian theology. It is not surprising that she discerns *hupomone* among Buddhists and Taoists, since her understanding of God and man comes closest to the latter traditions. Weil's *hupomone* presumes the Stoic *amor fati*, the human love for an all-pervading necessity that governs the universe. In most Christian theologies, the relationship between necessity (with the associated suffering and evil) and God is more ambiguous and we can hardly speak of a unanimous agreement as far as theodicy is concerned. An explicit duty to love 'fate' has not been integrated in mainstream Christianity. I explicitly attempt to answer the question of whether *amor fati* or obedience to God's necessity – with its implications for the human creature – is indeed a prerequisite for, or even is, the love for God.

#### I. Endurance in love and hope

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hamilton, 'Simone Weil's "Human Personality": Between the Personal and the Impersonal,' *Harvard Theological Review*, 98 (2005): 187-207 (p. 187).

Blessed are those who endure (*hupomeinantas*), recalls James in his letter. ‘You have heard of the patience (*hupomonèn*) of Job, and have seen the end (*telos*) of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.’<sup>2</sup> In this passage, Job is called blessed because he has been able to stand firm till the *happy end*. The mercy of God shows itself in the strength to endure the tribulations *and* in the final outcomes. In biblical texts, *hupomone* refers to endurance, perseverance or patience. Its verbal form is to ‘stay’.<sup>3</sup> To be *en hupomone* is to remain (stay) firm or to endure in spite of the blows that try to move oneself. In these passages, the ones who confessed the name of Jesus Christ were encouraged to stand firm despite the hate of others.<sup>4</sup> They were heartened to be faithful in love and prayer till the end, in order to be saved.<sup>5</sup> Though Weil’s *hupomone* also includes staying firm (motionless), her conception of salvation or end (*telos*) diverges from the biblical (Christian) one. For Weil, to be ‘saved’ means to be purified from evil, which is the same as losing one’s I voluntarily or accepting without revolt its loss through fate (misfortune). In other words, one is saved when one has reached the perfection of total detachment. According to her, detachment is the one way of killing oneself, the other one being suicide. As we saw in the previous chapter, Weil does not share the Christian eschatological perspective of salvation, of resurrection or of a new eternal life for each and every person, as unique being.<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Gabellieri, a Weil scholar, deems it important to prove that she did believe in the resurrection, against other commentators, including my own reading of Weil.<sup>7</sup> However, he seems to forget her criticism that man thinks that he is someone

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<sup>2</sup> Jas 5: 11.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Lk 2: 43; Acts 17: 14.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 10: 22; Mk 13: 13.

<sup>5</sup> Mt 24: 13; Rom 12: 12.

<sup>6</sup> See chapter III, part I.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Gabellieri, *Être et Don: Simone Weil et la philosophie* (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 2003), p. 501. Gabellieri points out that there is a gap between the various interpretations of Weil’s thought and what she really thought herself (p. 10). The irony is that he does not seem to escape from this tendency, and seems to want to make Weil a Christian (saint). He explains that ‘God transcends all principle that would reduce him to an object of human desire, and there is idolatry even in the fact of desiring eternal life, if this desire is more the desire of *my* life than of the good’ (p. 502). Gabellieri stresses that Weil cannot be accused of quietism. But he forgets that it cannot be denied that Weil was attracted to the same thing in John of the Cross as in the Hindu (Indian), Chinese and Buddhist mystics as well as the Stoics. One common element lies in the conception of ‘salvation’ as a kind of conflagration, annihilation into the Good or in some cases, nothingness.

else besides God, which goes hand in hand with her stress on the need for (total) de-creation. A resurrected being is still a creature, albeit in a different way. Man is *mediocre* not so much because of his egoism or narrow self-interest as because of his refusal to give up his I, his *person*. The only thing that matters is the impersonal sacred in everyone and death allows it to return to where it belongs. The scattered Good in human creatures is allowed to become One, while the human creatures are de-created and hence do not exist (in whatever form) anymore.

The absence of an eschatological perspective partly explains why *hope*, for Weil, becomes irrelevant. As she says, ‘What we love is the perfect joy itself. When one knows it, hope itself becomes useless, it has no meaning. The only thing that remains to be hoped is the grace not to disobey down here. The rest is the business of God and does not concern us.’<sup>8</sup> Not only is hope redundant but it is even harmful since it prevents total detachment. The usage of despair, that is the absence of hope, is precisely that it turns away from the future.<sup>9</sup> The story of Job is so authentic, for Weil, because it shows how the unfortunate man, in the end, realises that nothing besides the universe has any finality, namely its beauty. Job enters the pure land of the real.<sup>10</sup> His misfortune without consolation enables him to attain total detachment from all things that pass. It is hardly surprising that Weil does not refer to the happy end of the story when one knows that she elsewhere holds that ‘the temporal promises in the Old Testament were from diabolical and not divine source.’<sup>11</sup> While Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, praises the God of mercies and of all comfort, ‘who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God,’ Weil stresses that all sources of consolation are veils and lies that are invented by the mediocre part (that is nearly the whole) of the soul to prevent purification (annihilation).<sup>12</sup> Hope and consolation, according to her, soften the bitterness of misfortune and

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<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948), p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Pure Land’ is a term used in certain Buddhist traditions, such as the Yogacara School (Mahayana movement). Pure Lands are primarily realms where it is easy to hear and practise the Dharma. The Dharma (or Dhamma) has various meanings, such as eternal truths and cosmic law-orderliness discovered by the Buddha(s). The perceptible world is seen as representation only. Central to the Yogacara is the emphasis on consciousness. See, for instance, Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Simone Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre Concernant l’Amour de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor 1: 3-7; Compare with Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 39.

hence fill up the void that misfortune creates, instead of leaving it empty for the reception of grace. Beliefs in immortality and the providential order of events, ‘in short, the consolations that one usually seeks in religion’ hinder the complete annihilation of the I.<sup>13</sup> For Weil, man only has the choice between evil and the supernatural good. Consolation and hope, being from human source – the non-good – compete with the supernatural good, grace.

The two pressing questions that arise are, firstly whether consolation and hope are indeed human *lies* that prevent the working of grace and secondly whether *human* consolation of each other is *merely* human, antagonistic to the divine. The answer to the latter question depends on the conceived relationship between the human and divine. Weil’s strict separation of the natural order from the supernatural order will be critically examined in part II. In most Christian (as well as in Jewish and Islamic) traditions, hope, consolation and peace are seen as divine gifts that sustain the one in *hupomone*. It is difficult to ‘ascertain’ whether the one who is consoled does it through his own imagination or truly receives a kind of divine appeasement. One certainly ought to be aware of all types of illusions that make life bearable (comfortable), while leaving no room for the truth or grace. Yet, it would be unjust to call what is good evil. Is God a God who comforts and fills the human heart with hope or is He one who demands the de-creation of the creature? If de-creation is the end of the creature, and misfortune without hope and consolation the most effective way of killing the human being, then God cannot be conceived as one who appeases the pain. In the end, the distinction between human lies and divine grace depends on the conception of God and of the end of the human creature. A God who can love only Himself (the Good) indeed takes joy in the self-annihilation of his creatures who thereby show their love for Him. Yet, the whole matter is much more than theological speculation. Hope and consolation are human experiences, *healing* and enabling the ones hit by misfortune to live. Weil is most probably right when she says that their souls will never recover their warmth and in this sense, ‘healing’ does not imply a recovery of what is lost. It gives back something of the lost humanity, even if it is in a different form, and the strength to endure. It would be presumptuous to claim that one can heal oneself, which would be the implication if one claims that there are human illusions that can accomplish such a miracle (transformation). Hope and consolation or the processes that truly heal cannot be objectified and hence, the one who has reached the abyss of pain and despair can rarely tell what the content of consolation and hope is. At the end of the day one is not capable of ascertaining whether the one who is tortured to death experiences any ‘consolation’ from God. Weil’s experiences apparently showed her that God does not comfort but is present in a different way. The need for caution,

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<sup>13</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 23.

for moral sensitivity and humility cannot be stressed enough in saying something about the suffering of others.<sup>14</sup>

## II. The egoist God and the loving God

I have, above, raised the question of whether human consolation is *merely human* and hence sheer lie. Here, I wish to discuss Weil's claim that all that is human belongs to the order of the non-good while the good (Good) is transcendent. She stresses often enough the distance that separates God from human creatures, that is, the distance between the supernatural order and the natural order. 'One needs to place God at an infinite distance to conceive him innocent of evil; reciprocally, evil indicates that one needs to place God at an infinite distance.'<sup>15</sup> If one recalls, Weil criticizes the conception of God as almighty and instead points out how the Passion of God was the object of Greek and Egyptian mysteries, similar to Christianity.<sup>16</sup> The man who has no compassion for the pains of the ones who suffer offends Zeus who implores in these unfortunates.<sup>17</sup> Such a God is certainly not an impassible God but on the contrary, is willing to humiliate himself for the redemption of humankind. This conception, however, does not seem to rhyme with other conceptions of Weil. Why is such a passible God not one who comforts if He can implore? And, more importantly, how can such a God only love himself and love 'in us the consent not to be?'<sup>18</sup> I consider it difficult to reconcile the concept of divine love as 'the

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<sup>14</sup> In her review essay on Sarah Pinnock's *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinkers Respond to the Holocaust* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), K. Hannah Holtschneider says that 'Pinnock concludes her analysis of these (anti-) theodicies with four 'guidelines for philosophical and theological approaches to evil and suffering' (139). Firstly, she suggests 'epistemic humility,' meaning that we ought to be cautious about whether and how we may speak about 'God's nature, acts, and purposes' (139), hence 'theodicy, which explains or justifies God's permission of evil and suffering aims at an unreachable goal' (140). Secondly, she proposes 'moral sensitivity' towards the suffering. This guideline cautions against assigning meaning to suffering that is not developed by the victims themselves and thereby responds to concerns of theodicy.' K. Hannah Holtschneider, 'The Shadow of the Shoah: A Review Essay,' *Journal of Religion and Society* 5 (2003). Full text available online (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2003/2003-12.html>).

<sup>15</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter I (part V) of this thesis.

<sup>17</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 41.



inflexible necessity, misery, distress, the crushing weight of need and labour that exhausts, cruelty, tortures, violent death, constraint, terror, illnesses' with a God who cries and implores for the sake of the ones who suffer.<sup>19</sup> It would nearly seem that there are two (types of) Gods. If one assumes that Weil's God is primarily characterised by the notions of the unchanging Good (Platonic), eternal Wisdom (Stoic) or non-acting divine action (Taoist and the Upanishads), then the only way to explain this apparent conflict is through her distinction between Personal God and Impersonal God. Dionysius, Osiris, Jesus Christ, Zeus and Prometheus would then be Personal Gods, or the incarnations of the Personal God.<sup>20</sup> They are the Mediators between the Impersonal God – identified with the divine order of the universe or with justice, truth and beauty – and human creatures. The exact functions of these Mediators or incarnations of God are subjects of debate among scholars but one of them, as I see it, is as a source of purity, which acts as a counterweight to evil.<sup>21</sup>

My focus, however, is not on her concept of Mediator or (incarnated) Personal God, since the latter does not explain Weil's strict distinction between the Good and the human creature or her concept of de-creation.<sup>22</sup> I also hold that her concept of God as the only Good also determines her understanding of 'God is love.' This is why 'love is not consolation, it is light.'<sup>23</sup> The divine love is the light that passes through the transparent human creature, to love himself. God is the Good, the only pure, highest Good and anything else can only be less than the Good. If one takes Plato's ladder, then all those things and creatures are the lower rungs (*metaxu*) and yet need to bear some relation to the Good if dualism is to be avoided. In the case of the universe, the relation is intimate because passive matter can only reflect perfectly the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Hence, '*Brahma* in the Gita is impersonal God while Vishnu or Hari, incarnated in Krishna, [is] personal God.' Simone Weil, *Cahiers II* (Paris: Plon, 1953), p. 429. Of course, one can choose not to explain this apparent contradiction and simply hold that there is an inconsistency in Weil's reasoning.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Springsted does not agree with scholars who argue that Weil does not see the need for the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. 'Cabaud and others, while they are incorrect in not seeing the need Weil sees for the actual incarnation and crucifixion of the Word, are right in seeing that Christ does play the role of example and paradigm in Weil's thought.' Eric Springsted, p. 137. I tend to agree with Jacques Cabaud since the other incarnations were not always crucified.

<sup>22</sup> The concept of Mediator is rather a logical consequence of the absolute transcendence of God.

<sup>23</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 23.

beauty of the wise Good. With respect to human creatures, the distance is the greatest because they are intentional beings who usually refuse to obey the Good like matter does. By refusing to obey, they do not imitate the beauty of the obedient matter, while this is the duty of all created things. If one thinks along this line, the very creation of intentional human creatures becomes problematic. The Good or Beauty is no longer guaranteed but becomes scattered in many human creatures.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the very creation is a sacrifice for God who submits himself (the Good) to necessity by creating human beings, mediocre beings who are other than the good. While God, being the Good, ‘can love but himself,’ Weil holds that, on the contrary, ‘man would like to be egoist and cannot [be].’<sup>25</sup> Human creatures, according to her, can only love something else.<sup>26</sup> This difference expresses the distance between the order of the Good (God) and that of the necessity (man).

Is it indeed the case that God created human creatures to continue loving himself through them and that the creation is, therefore, a sacrifice? The creation of others besides oneself can be perceived as a sacrifice if one can – or ought to – love only oneself. Saying something about God or the love of God remains highly speculative since He is not an object. There are traditionally two grounds for saying something about the ‘essence’ of God – or about what makes God be God – namely ‘nature’ and revelation. An additional one is mystical experience, though the difficulty, in this case, is to determine whether the experience is relevant for others and whether it does say something about God. Even in the case of so-called divine revelations, the role of cultural determinants can form an obstacle to discerning the unique ways of God. The conception of a God who gets involved in wars and who is himself called a warrior with an army can be perceived as one that is culturally influenced.<sup>27</sup> Another basis for conceptualisations of God – related to the traditional ‘nature’ one – is that of human experiences

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<sup>24</sup> I do not know what Weil thought of animals. I dare think that she perceived them as part of the creation without human creatures.

<sup>25</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 66. A very ambivalent claim about the human psychology or ‘human nature’, but I will not deal with it in this thesis.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Groenhout, for instance, points out how the ‘image of fatherhood and masculinity [has] a profound affect on the ways in which we can think of agapé love. If love is a matter of other-directed care, and it comes from a transcendent, powerful God whose very nature requires authority and power, it cannot be a love that involves submission, loss of authority, or reciprocal connections.’ Ruth Groenhout, ‘The Love of God the Father: *Agapé* and Masculinity,’ in Craig A. Boyd (ed.), *Visions of Agapé: problems and possibilities in human and divine love* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), p. 55.

and ‘human nature’. By doing so, I also answer – negatively – the question of whether the divine and the human are strictly separated. Or, in other words, my reasoning will eventually confirm my initial assumption that the two orders cannot be strictly separated. If I assume that human creatures are created by God, they cannot be *completely* different from God, unless one wants to accept a form of dualism. Even matter must be created by God. Hence, it is quite reasonable to assume that the human love and divine love do bear a relationship to each other, that the one is an analogy for the other. The *rare* self-giving love between human creatures – true friendship or compassion – can only spring from divine source, and must be a (however blurred) reflection of divine love.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the ‘natural’ creature has the capacity for supernatural (unlimited) love.<sup>29</sup> Whether this capacity is ‘natural’ or transformed through grace does not matter so much. In any case, the ‘natural’ is not a closed, demarcated order but one that interacts with the divine.

The (absolute) transcendence of the Good can explain why Weil saw the just attitude of man towards God as being the obedient slave (servant). In this context, it is interesting to recall the passage in John, in which Jesus’ disciples are no longer called servants but *friends*.<sup>30</sup> Thomas of Aquinas is a frequently quoted authority for his understanding of the theological virtue *caritas* as a form of friendship between man and God, in and through grace. *Caritas* (or *agape*) is the love of man for God, as the answer to the love of God for man.<sup>31</sup> This reciprocity coupled with the desire for the well-being of each other characterise friendship (love) relations. As Aquinas scholars stress, the friendship with God – as with another fellow human being – ‘is a kind of communion or participation in the life of the other.’<sup>32</sup> Craig Boyd stresses that ‘this

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<sup>28</sup> By ‘self-giving’, I do not mean a kind of self-annihilation but a genuine giving without self-interest or self-seeking, for the good of the other.

<sup>29</sup> ‘The natural love of the creature for God shows a structure that we can call ‘self-transcendent’.’ Rudi te Velde, ‘Zelfliefde en transcendentie: Thomas over zelfliefde, naastenliefde en de liefde tot God,’ in R.A. te Velde (ed.), *Over liefde en liefde: beschouwingen over de liefde (amor, amicitia, caritas) volgens Thomas van Aquino* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 1998), p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Jn 15: 12-15.

<sup>31</sup> Compare with 1 Cor 13: 4-13, a passage that is often referred to when dealing with the three ‘theological virtues’ faith, hope and love (*caritas, agape*).

<sup>32</sup> ‘For Aquinas the love we have for God is a kind of friendship with God. But friendship is a kind of communion or participation in the life of the other. Charity itself is a special kind of participation in God since the created order is such that all creatures ‘live and move and have

participation in the life of the other is the ‘essence’ of God; to participate in the life of the other is the nature of love.’<sup>33</sup> Such a concept of love differs radically from that of Weil, for whom God is primarily the Good, which does not (necessarily) contain the notion of self-sharing or self-giving. A God who is love – in the non-Weilian sense – longs for the existence of other beings besides Himself since the nature of love is to surpass or transcend itself.<sup>34</sup> Such a God is not likely to consider the creation of human creatures as a sacrifice since He takes joy in the reciprocal relationships with them. The fact that these beings are sinful (mediocre) beings only stresses the endurance, tolerance and greatness of (divine) love. Boyd does not wish to embrace the strict distinction between divine and human loves but instead argues that each type of love – parental love for children, erotic love for the beautiful, the bonds of genuine friendship and self-sacrificial love – ‘manifests the goodness of God’s love in different ways. Affection demonstrates the comforting love God has for humanity and *eros* demonstrates God’s desire for intimate union with humanity. In friendship we see the possibility for mature love between persons who choose one another as subjects of benevolence and in charity we see the self-giving love of God who is poured out on behalf of others. But affection, *eros* and friendship can *all* be self-giving. [...] So too, charity, friendship and *eros* should all manifest affection.’<sup>35</sup> To love is to wish the well-being (good) of the other, for his or her own sake, not for oneself. The mutual friendship bonds also imply that the loved one is an end, no means and hence no glass through which God can love *Himself*.<sup>36</sup>

### III. *Amor fati* and freedom

The good order of creation, for Weil, is the perfect union between God and his universe without human creatures. Hence, human beings participate in the creation of the world by de-creating themselves. She discerns this idea of de-creation in the philosophy of the Upanishads.<sup>37</sup> It is

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their being’ in God.’ Craig A. Boyd, ‘The Perichoretic Nature of Love: Beyond the Perfection Model,’ in Boyd (ed.), *Visions of Agapé*, p. 19.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>34</sup> Compare with the concept of ‘ecstasy’. Jan Aertsen points out that ‘the novelty in Dionysius is the thought that there is also ecstasy in God, a going-out-of-itself love towards the created.’ Jan Aertsen, ‘Eros is goddelijker dan agape: Dionysius Areopagita en Thomas van Aquino over de liefde,’ in Te Velde (ed.), *Over liefde en liefde*, p. 121.

<sup>35</sup> Boyd, ‘The Perichoretic Nature of Love,’ pp. 29-30.

<sup>36</sup> Aertsen, ‘Eros is goddelijker dan agape,’ p. 123.

<sup>37</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, pp. 42-43.

tempting to explain Weil's concept of de-creation in terms of her own biography, her personal experience and struggles.<sup>38</sup> As Christopher Hamilton suggests, she sometimes takes 'her own sense [...] of her own spiritual condition, and transposing it into a metaphysical thesis about the nature of the universe.'<sup>39</sup> She could not believe that God could love such a mediocre being as – she thought – she was. Since all creatures are so mediocre, it is impossible that God would love them for their own sake. Such an insight might justly be typified as subjective and yet I do not wish to discard it as such. Her insight that man is a mediocre being who gives his love to social collectivities and gets attached to all kinds of objects is certainly worth consideration. The observation that man feels stronger when he can say 'we' instead of 'I', explains a lot of evil in the world. Yet, however weak (mediocre) human creatures may be, they have been created with (for) the capacity for friendship and love. It is highly relevant to note that Weil sees the 'fact' that the human being cannot love himself but only something else as a sign the misery of the creature *and* as the 'source of his grandeur.'<sup>40</sup> This enables him to devote, sacrifice himself totally to an order or to someone else. This self-sacrifice is, however, rarely done for the invisible God, says Weil. Besides, she holds that man is prepared to die for a cause but is much more afraid to become nothing, that is, to lose his I out of love for God. The best example is Job who was stripped of everything that made him who he was and still did not die. He longed for death that simply did not come.

Love for God, according to Weil, demands the *amor fati* and the de-creation of the creature in oneself. The human being has to become obedient *human matter* if he or she loves God. I contest such a concept of love and Weil's claim that God expects the human creature to refuse his authorisation to exist.<sup>41</sup> A friend wishes the other to exist and to subsist. If God, indeed, created each and every human being to be His friend, He could hardly have created him to rejoice in his self-annihilation. As I remarked before, communion or union presumes two parties while the disappearance (assimilation) or self-annihilation into a greater Good cannot be called a reciprocal relationship. In his *Être et Don*, Gabellieri rejects the criticism of Rolf Kühn who has pointed out that Weil's stress on de-creation offends the gratuity of creation as gift.<sup>42</sup> Gabellieri's explanation is quite intriguing (apologetic) since he says that this

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, one can argue that the claim that man cannot love himself is primarily a subjective experience that is made general.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Hamilton, 'Power, Punishment and Reconciliation in the Political and Social Thought of Simone Weil,' *European Journal of Social Theory* 11 (3) (2008): 315-330 (p. 318).

<sup>40</sup> Weil, *Cahiers* II, p. 212.

<sup>41</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> Gabellieri, *Être et Don*, p. 499.

'misinterpretation' has got to do with an insufficient understanding of the phenomenon of gift. According to him, Weil's 'apparent' refusal of the gift of creation is a criticism of the urge to possess (eternal life). Weil's stress on de-creation, however, not only 'offends' the gratuity of creation of gift, but is a normative claim about the end of every creature and the 'essence' of God. It has real implications for man's understanding of himself, of God and for human actions. She claims that God is really loved by the man who gives up what makes him a person and who is content when misfortune takes care of his annihilation. Weil's reasoning *indirectly* justifies the (social and natural) misfortune of human beings. Hamilton rightly points out the danger that such reasoning does not take the suffering of others seriously.<sup>43</sup> The irony is that Weil refers, a few times, to the scribes and Pharisees who shut off the kingdom of heaven from people, but does not realise that her own theology can have the same atrocious effects.<sup>44</sup> For, the man who thinks that God desires his self-annihilation cannot even *hope* that God loves him for his own sake. Weil's religious philosophy encourages self-hate, which can legitimise prevailing social (religious) orders that are based on such contempt for the human being.

Becoming *human matter* implies giving up the faculty of discrimination and intention, the freedom that one has received as human creature. I do not wish to deal with the question of social or biological determinism or non-determinism, but for my purpose, it is enough that I restrict myself to the freedom to love, to hope, and to revolt. Is the one who *refuses* to accept things as they are, and wishes that they were different, expressing a lack of love for God? I realise that an 'answer' to such a question can be perceived as pretentious and yet, the question needs to be posed for the sake of all those who suffer and for the sake of human freedom. It is useful to stress how easy it is to destroy freedom and those critical human faculties that enable the distinction between good and evil. They are taken away from people or people give them up, to social beasts or in return for comfort. It is precisely because of their fragility that I would argue that they have to be cherished, nourished and preserved as precious gifts. Perhaps some more light might be shed if one still holds, as Boyd does, that all types of human love reflect the goodness of God's love. Human love can rarely love the 'fate' of others. This was also Weil's struggle. The fact that people are *forced* to accept their fate and the fate of others, since complaining 'does not change the course of things,' can hardly be called an act of love for God (and for the unfortunates). It comes closer to defeatism, fatalism (in the common, non-philosophical sense), nihilism, depression or other pathological states. Individuals ought to be free to understand their own passive acceptance as love for God, as long as they do not impose

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<sup>43</sup> Hamilton, 'Power, Punishment and Reconciliation in the Political and Social Thought of Simone Weil,' p. 315.

<sup>44</sup> See Mt 23: 13-14.

such a moral demand on others. It may be true that revolt, anger and non-acceptance do not change unfortunate events and perhaps they make the pain worse. Whether man becomes an egoist without I, pulling others with him in the abyss, *because he revolts*, can be questioned but is too complex an issue to be discussed here.<sup>45</sup> Revolt is often the reaction to what one experiences as injustice and as incomprehensible. Man may revolt against events (against God, if he perceives them as the will of God) out of love for others. He may revolt out of implicit love for himself if he has lost everything that made him experience himself as a human being. In these senses, anger, revolt and non-acceptance can be seen as legitimate reactions of human beings who are conscious of their human dignity and freedom. They, thereby, express their need for justice, love and solidarity with others.<sup>46</sup>

Weil expresses her surprise (criticism) that Christianity has not integrated the Stoic piety for the universe, the only fatherland. As she ironically remarks, ‘the cosmic element is so absent in Christianity as currently practised that one could forget that the universe has been created by God.’<sup>47</sup> This critical note does touch upon a crucial issue, namely the problem of reconciling evil and suffering with the faith in a loving God. Weil’s conception of the universe as the body or touch of God seems to be the only way to avoid dualism. Yet, most Christian theologians have not been able or perhaps, do not wish to reconcile the love of God with the misfortune that the universe inflicts. This would also explain why (mainstream) Christianity has not integrated the Stoic *amor fati*. Most Christian theologies stress the love of God *despite* misfortune, evil and suffering. What Weil claims is the opposite, namely that misfortune is precisely the expression of God’s mercy or love.<sup>48</sup> Though she stresses that suffering does not have any meaning – since nothing down here has any finality – she implicitly does reconcile evil and suffering with the love (Goodness) of God.<sup>49</sup> This ‘reconciliation’ is possible because of Weil’s stress on the nothingness of the human being who is, in any case, meant to de-create

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<sup>45</sup> The egoist without an I has not only lost his humanity through circumstances but also wants to destroy that of others. See chapter II, part III, for more on Weil’s understanding of what misfortune can do with those not prepared for it.

<sup>46</sup> Revolt, however, rarely subsists, but often turns into prayer and inner peace (and hence a *kind* of acceptance). But this ‘acceptance’ can hardly be called a human achievement: revolt and the refusal to explain or comprehend, *out of love*, actually leave room for grace.

<sup>47</sup> Weil, *Pensées Sans Ordre*, p. 22 ; *Attente de Dieu*, p. 167.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> ‘All pain that does not detach is lost pain.’ Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 24. See chapter I, part III of the thesis, for Weil’s view of suffering (misfortune). Note that the love of God for man is, in the end, the love for Himself.

himself. Misfortune de-creates most effectively. It must be pointed out that Weil's thought is far from being clear and consistent as far as this issue is concerned.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere she stresses that to 'note this mercy [of God] directly in nature, one needs to render oneself blind, deaf, without pity to believe that one can.'<sup>51</sup> She explains that it is only through mystical knowledge that one can claim that the created world is the work of mercy. 'Those who possess the privilege of mystical contemplation, having experienced the mercy of God, *suppose* that, God being mercy, the created world is the work of mercy.'<sup>52</sup>

#### IV. Love and freedom

Weil's concepts of man, of his end and of God make freedom problematic, if not impossible. Due to the unbridgeable distance between man and God – the non-good and the Good – man is incapable of *willing* the good. The will is derogatively considered as the muscular effort of man who wishes to attain heaven by jumping as high as possible. The safest for man, is therefore not to search or act actively, but to act, not *for* the object, but *through* a necessity.<sup>53</sup> It is a sort of passive action, based on obedience and that excludes voluntary initiatives. The 'choice' between evil and the supernatural good is actually the choice between the desire of keeping one's I or of annihilating it. Indeed, according to Weil, 'there is absolutely no other free act that is allowed to us, than the destruction of the I.'<sup>54</sup> This is the expression of our love for the Good. In the previous chapter, we saw that attention and prayer (that is nothing else than the highest form of attention) purify the creature from evil (his I). Thereafter, divine constraint ensures that this pure creature passively does the supernatural good. One can speak of a supernatural mechanism through which grace responds to the degree of purification (perfection). I wish to problematise the conceptualisation of love and prayer as forms of attention and the concept of a supernatural mechanism, through which grace responds to attention. I contend that these Weilian concepts are based on a fatalistic vision of life, which denies human and divine freedom. Since the end of the creature is de-creation – in Weil's thought – and since nothing 'down here' has any finality,

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<sup>50</sup> Gabellieri's hypothesis is that 'only the metaphysics of charity is capable of shedding full light on the question of being in S. Weil.' Gabellieri, *Être et Don*, p. 19. I, on the contrary, argue that this charity (compassion) actually and fortunately disrupts the unity or coherence of her thought.

<sup>51</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 113.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 35.



the prevailing social order does not matter too much as long as there is some legitimate order. Not only does such a vision of life threaten the freedom of man and of God, but is also a potential instrument to justify injustice. For, Weil's belief that everything down here is 'soiled by force, and hence unworthy of love' makes it difficult to want to change social orders.<sup>55</sup> She considered order as a need of the human soul, maintained by old traditions that ensure that the past gives finality to the present. Any change, of course, interrupts this continuous flow and since everything is soiled, the probability is high that the change is for the worse.

*Attention*, according to Weil, is the *substance* of the love for God and for one's neighbour.<sup>56</sup> I readily agree that one who loves is fully conscious of and concerned about the other. In this case, attentiveness reflects the state of someone's soul. Attention can also be considered as an exercise or means to develop a certain susceptibility, 'openness' or sensitivity. But while I would consider attention as a 'natural emanation' from love or else as a means to develop one's consciousness of others, Weil sees it as the very essence of love and prayer. Hence, she can say that 'loving' God in misfortune is not even difficult since the same orientation towards God can be maintained. Attention, indeed, can be learned, perfected, controlled and sustained even in the most atrocious moments, so that one can speak of a kind of immobility, impassibility or *apatheia* of the soul. But this linear equation between love and attention is problematic for several reasons. We have to recall that, for Weil, man has to continue or desire loving God in misfortune, even if His absence is felt. If the soul ceases to love, 'the absence of God becomes definitive.'<sup>57</sup> She assumes that the 'greatest pain does not touch the point in the soul that consents to a good orientation.'<sup>58</sup> The conception of such a point that cannot be touched by pain would be a source of consolation and hope for unfortunates if it would be plausible. The epistemic problem is precisely that her metaphysical assumption cannot be negated or accepted. The greatest, moral problem with this assumption is that man is

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<sup>55</sup> Simone Weil, *Cahiers III* (Paris: Plon, 1956), p. 121. Hence, Weil recognises divine action in the story of the *Sudra* who is justly killed by the incarnated god because he transgressed the religious (social) order by practising the spirituality of a higher caste (chapter I). According to the logic of Weil, the man should not have moved from his caste – determined social place – but should have waited till God comes. I cannot help questioning Weil's intellectual probity in such an interpretation.

<sup>56</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 97.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103. See also chapter III, part V of the thesis. 'Salvation', of course, is not the eternal life of the individual (person) and therefore, it is useless to argue that salvation, in this picture, is no longer gratuitous.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

burdened with an unbearable responsibility for his own ‘salvation’ or for not falling into a definitive dark night. It is up to him to desire loving God, ‘forcing’ Him to descend.<sup>59</sup> This presumes a God who only seems capable of responding to the desire of man and hence who cannot take free initiatives. It would appear as if Weil’s God is incapable of ‘loving’ the human creature ‘unconditionally’ and is *not free* to act unexpectedly and unpredictably.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly, Weil did not want to conceive love as a state of the soul since it would then have meant that it is not constant. The soul is also subjected to the ‘force of gravity’, that is, to necessity. She made pure love nearly a stranger to the human being since this point of the soul is not part of the mediocre part of the creature, namely his I. Only this point is not subjected to necessity and hence to misfortune. I argue that Weil’s concept of love does not take human love with its weakness and greatness seriously, and therefore, also fails to understand divine love. Furthermore, her dualism – between the point of the soul and the I – does not recognise love, however weak and volatile, as a constitutive part of the *whole* human being. Human love, as commonly understood, is an emotional and cognitive experience, which also implies that it is rarely constant since very few mortals are capable of loving unconditionally at all times. Yet, an unconditional and faithful love is praised and considered as a reflection of divine love. Indeed, such a love is ascribed to God in Christianity (and Judaism), and such a love is expected from parents and friends. Parental love, friendship, *eros* (in Boyd’s sense) and charity imply reciprocity between different, unique persons or beings who, through the participation in the lives of each other, contribute towards the well-being of each other. On the other hand, the love for the other, according to Weil, is only pure if it is ‘surrounded everywhere by a compact envelope of indifference that maintains a distance.’<sup>61</sup> The creature who is capable of pure love is one without I, other-directed and does not demand any love in return. The only thing that is implicitly (unconsciously) loved in the creature is the universal, anonymous beauty or sacred impersonal, present in all creatures.<sup>62</sup>

The end of the human creature is to become nothing and he should certainly not wish to be loved. It is to this end – to become nothing – that one acts, that one prays.<sup>63</sup> To ‘pray God, not only hidden from men, but by thinking that God does not exist’ is a mode of purification.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> This is quite a paradox since man’s will, on the other hand, is considered to be impotent to choose the good.

<sup>60</sup> This is perhaps a useless remark since God, in Weil’s picture, is meant to love Himself.

<sup>61</sup> Weil, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 81.

<sup>62</sup> See chapter II, part II.

<sup>63</sup> Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, p. 43.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Prayer is nothing else than the highest form of attention. Here again, there is no mutual relation, in this case, between man and God. One would even get the impression that ‘prayer’ is merely a natural psychological process of self-denial and self-annihilation, which does not require any God at all but instead, does demand a high degree of consciousness. Such a form of prayer can be practised and perfected, but can also impose an unnecessary burden and responsibility on man at all times. While Weil probably wished to make ‘prayer’ a form of exercise that can be practised by anyone, even the atheist, it is in fact a narrow conceptualisation since it excludes the simple begging for bread, for help and the angry reproach of the unfortunate.<sup>65</sup> If there is no such thing as an untouchable point of the soul, one can easily imagine that the one crushed by misfortune can do nothing else than mourning. Weil’s concept of prayer can be contested if one’s concept of God is of one who does not merely respond to pure attention but ‘helps our infirmities and prays in us with groans that cannot be uttered.’<sup>66</sup> A God who loves unconditionally, like a parent, friend, lover, does not ‘reward’ the creature who loves him but is able to love him even when the unfortunate creature hates Him. If God is a God who loves the human creature for his own sake and wants to be loved in return, then there can be no such thing as a supernatural mechanism that *proportionally* rewards the one who keeps his or her eyes fixed in the direction that is presumably given by God. Instead, there is *freedom* for both God and the person, which also means unpredictability, uncertainties and wonders. Friendship has its certainties since one can expect faithfulness and constancy from a friend. But the freedom that love creates also means that a friend has the room to act unexpectedly and to surprise the other. This also means that man does not need to fear not to desire, love or pray enough – in any sense – but can have faith that love (Love) endures and forgives all things.

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<sup>65</sup> Weil, *Cahiers II*, p. 312.

<sup>66</sup> Rom 8: 26-27.

## Conclusion

Some scholars have claimed to discern one ‘unifying principle’ in Weil’s thought, be it her ‘pythagorean and platonian doctrine’ or a ‘metaphysics of charity.’ Others, on the contrary, have pointed out (and criticised) the inconsistencies in her writings. I cannot help wondering which judgement Weil would have preferred for herself. I dare guess that she desired (*needed*) consistency, order being, for her, a need of the soul, but I think that she was too conscious of the paradoxes and contradictions of human existence to believe that this could be possible. My thesis could only reconstruct Weil’s ideas, by implicitly assuming that her thought is consistent and indeed, certain concepts recur often enough to confirm this hypothesis. Her views of God as the only transcendent Good of whom the beautiful universe is the perceptible ‘body’, of man as a non-good, of love as attention and of salvation as purification can be called ‘Weilian’ without doing injustice to her. Yet, her reasoning wavers when confronted with the misfortune of others and her own compassion with them. I am inclined to say that Weil was faithful enough to her desire for intellectual probity to allow a paradox in her writings, namely her conviction that necessity that inflicts misfortune is the touch of God, the only Good and hence needs to be loved – *amor fati* – while the sight of unfortunates being crushed by the same misfortune tore her soul. How often did she not stress that suffering (misfortune) should not be explained, that it should not be given any meaning? And yet, her conceptions of God and man implicitly ‘solve’ what man experiences as a paradox or a ‘mystery’, namely (the faith in) a loving God who is powerful enough to have created *ex nihilo*, has promised eternal life and who yet seems powerless or cruel enough to allow, or even to *inflict* misfortune through His obedient servant Necessity. At the same time, Weil’s compassion with the unfortunates sometimes made the love for God nearly, if not, impossible. *Unfortunately*, Weil blamed herself for this failure to love God, hoping that He forgives compassion. This harshness for herself becomes a general ‘anti-human-ism’ when she considers misfortune as not any worse than the failure of man to pay attention to the beauty of the world. The duty to love the Good, in Weil’s thinking, implies the self-annihilation of the human creature who is nothing compared to the Good and whose end is therefore to become nothing.

I stressed that it is unfortunate that Weil blamed herself for her incapacity to love – apparently love is here not the same as attention but a state of the soul – just as she could not simply ‘cry tears of blood’ by seeing the misfortune of others, without directly trying to justify Providential Necessity. If she would have taken this incapacity to love seriously, she would have done justice to many of her fellow-beings (and to herself) and I argue, to God. I do indeed believe, that by not perceiving the ‘states of the soul’ that disrupted her *amor fati* as real, and by

holding on to her conceptions of Providential Necessity and of man, she actually filled a void – created by a painful incomprehension and experience – and hence prevented an alternative understanding of man and God, one that does not so radically separate the human from the divine. But at the same time, I realise that her contempt for what is human, her consciousness of the fragility of the human body and soul would have made this alternative concept very difficult. Of course, the perspective of a God who truly loves the human creature – however mediocre he might be – for the latter’s own sake, as the parent, lover and friend loves his child, loved one and friend and wishes his well-being, does not ‘solve’ the problem of theodicy. Most theologies are reticent to say much about the relationship between God and misfortune or suffering and evil, which is most probably better than saying too much. But, as a result, the old question of theodicy runs the risk of becoming an unsolvable problem that no one dares to touch. Yet, it is too easy to say that certain matters are beyond human understanding, and that man should therefore remain silent. The human desire to understand is real, and so is the experience of paradox and contradiction when confronted with (sometimes inhuman) suffering and evil. If the duty to love God is an absolute one, as Weil thought it was and as I think it is, albeit in a different way, and if this becomes difficult if not impossible for people because of suffering and evil, then I cannot but contend that theology or philosophy (if it deals with the same issues) does have the responsibility to help people understanding their realities and to prevent them from getting paralysed by incomprehension. As we have seen, a seemingly ‘simple’ concept love is, in the end, not so unequivocal. What does it mean and imply to love God? What does the love of God for the human creature mean and imply? Weil was conscious enough of her responsibility towards humankind (and the Good) to dare giving answers to these questions, and even though I might disagree with some of her views, I highly value her commitment and zeal.

However, if theologians (or philosophers) are to say something about such existential matters, they cannot speculate in their ivory tower, but ought to be aware of their political and social contexts that largely determine human relationships and their thinking about and experience of God. The consciousness of misfortune, of the fragility of human existence does not need to lead to the conclusion that there is no finality down here – as Weil thought – but obliges scholars to become involved (be it indirectly) in, concerned about political affairs. Indeed, they ought to be aware of the social conditions necessary for human love to be an expression of divine love and ought to plead for them. They ought to be alert (*attentive*) to dangerous trends that threaten the human freedom to be a thinking being whose love can transcend itself. Weil personifies the integer commitment that is both intellectual and political (social). The void that the lack of finality creates can be easily filled by so many evils. She

rightly stressed the danger of all kinds of ideologies and social beasts that unjustly claim the absolute love (attachment) of man. How can a man whose life is governed by a thirst to increase, as Weil so vividly puts it, to progress, to become and acquire more have any eyes for his neighbours and his invisible God? When she remarks that man is no longer capable of compassion, love for the other, she refers to her political (cultural) context (of class conflicts, alienation and human exploitation). Far from seeing this context as a necessity, I consider it as the expression of the creative and destructive powers of man, coupled with his weakness. I can only agree with Weil who pointed out the incapacity of man – his weakness and impatience – to live with voids. Wars or radical changes destroy relationships, cognitive and emotional patterns and create vacuums that can be filled at will. The *meanings* of love and friendship are dependent on the actual context. Along more or less the same line as Boyd, I also argued that divine and human loves cannot be strictly separated but that human love is actually for us, human creatures, a way to speak about and understand God's love. One can imagine what the implications, therefore, are when human love becomes corrupted. When friendship and love relationships become so 'liquid' that they can be unbound at will and demand no commitment (participation), but allow a dubious 'freedom' to live and let live, which strangely resembles indifference or a dislike to be involved in demanding enterprises, it becomes highly difficult and confusing to say something about divine love.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps attention, as Weil understood it, is the only thing that can be asked from human beings in a society (world) in which 'love' has lost its divine character, in which people are alienated from each other, are afraid of too much commitment and use each other as instruments (means) for the satiation of their own desires. Yet, this cannot be the case if man is created to be loved and to love.

The *fact* that man is weak (or mediocre, as Weil says), that he can be destroyed and be made an object or dead matter, and at the same time, that he is capable of horrendous (refined) monstrosity does not say much about his *end*, or the end to which he has been created. The fact that he can be made into human matter does not mean that he ought to become human matter. A man whose mind and heart are so taken up with all kinds of attachments that he disregards his responsibility towards his fellow-beings and God, would indeed do well to learn to be attentive, to see the invisible. But this only means that such beings 'have not yet become the kinds of lovers that God intends they be.'<sup>2</sup> In other words, one has to be careful not to confuse the

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<sup>1</sup> On the 'liquidity' of love, see for instance, Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid love: on the frailty of human bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Craig A. Boyd, 'The Perichoretic Nature of Love: Beyond the Perfection Model,' in Craig A. Boyd (ed.), *Visions of Agapé: problems and possibilities in human and divine love* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 29-30.

condition of man as it is, in a particular place at a particular time, with his true end. This distinction – between how things are and how they are meant to be – will not be easily found in Weil’s writings, since all events obey necessity. Unlike her, I contend that things could have been different and are meant to be different, since man could have chosen and can choose differently. Seeing necessity everywhere is ‘too easy’ and makes man too passive towards evil.<sup>3</sup> Hence my extreme scepticism and suspicion towards claims about ‘God’s will’ or ‘divine order.’ It is a nearly inhuman task to distinguish between the ‘revelations’ of God or sources of purity and human fictions (creations). Ironically enough, I think that Weil underestimated evil by seeing the sacred in so many things, in texts, religions and cultures. In spite of the risk of erring, I do consider it a human obligation to try to distinguish between the divine and human creations, for the sake of God and man. The name of God has too often been (mis)used to legitimize all kinds of behaviour and orders. I do believe that if God wants to reveal himself, in order to be loved, He cannot ask the inhuman from human creatures. He would have to reveal himself in such a way that He may not be confused with the worldly grandeur. The Cross, not really the most prestigious place for God, is such a way. In the same line of reasoning, one can expect God in the outcasts and the puniest of this world.<sup>4</sup> They are, in the end, quite invisible.<sup>5</sup> Weil’s stress on necessity can lead to an underestimation of man’s power to create unjust orders *and* of his capacity to discern this injustice and reform such orders. Man has the moral and political responsibility to fight for the frail *freedom* to be human, to love with all his heart, mind and soul. Only in freedom can he become aware of his God-given dignity and can he love with a divine love.

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter IV of the thesis.

<sup>4</sup> Compare with Mat 25: 35-40, a text to which Weil often referred.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Creative attention consists in really paying attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous and lifeless flesh on the side of the road. [...] Faith, says St Paul, is the sight of invisible things. In this moment of attention, faith is present as well as love.’ Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1950), p. 136.

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