LOVE’S LABOR:
THE RELATIONAL SELF IN SIMONE WEIL’S MYSTICAL-POLITICAL

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by

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Abstract
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This project, a new understanding of the manner in which justice and love intersect in the category of the mystical-political, develops out of the thought of twentieth-century French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. Though her writing is notoriously difficult and demanding and her biography is not without controversy, her worth as an intellectual can in part be measured by the burgeoning cross-disciplinary influence of her thought: novelists, feminists, ethicists, political philosophers, and theologians have found in her work fruitful resources for reflection and constructive endeavors. This project is intended as a contribution to that literature, but it is also intended to bring Weil’s ideas—particularly those concerned with the relational character of the human being and of the world in which humans are embedded—beyond the sometimes insular scholarship devoted to Weil’s work and into a broader conversation that includes thinkers as diverse as Plotinus, Martin Heidegger, Catherine Keller, Luce Irigaray, and Hannah Arendt among others. For Weil, justice is coextensive with the presence of a love that is capable of identifying with someone different, while refraining from the kind of objectification or appropriation that so often accompanies such an
identification. While she has been called a pessimist by some, she ultimately rejects the notion that justice is merely a pleasant delusion or a purely utopian ideal, arguing that it can be known “experimentally.” Yet given the bleak realities of the world in which she was writing, she is forced to ask how, and to what extent, justice might find purchase in a world governed by a relentless and incomprehensible network of forces—something she calls “necessity” in partial continuity with the Platonic tradition. Indeed, by appropriating and transforming aspects of the Christian Platonic tradition in a way that permits her to elaborate a philosophical anthropology which understands the self as dynamic and relational, and by bringing this anthropology together with a thoroughgoing critique of technology’s destructive power and a Marxian emphasis on the significance of labor, Weil provides important tools for the development of a persuasive, timely, and valuable model for linking the mystical and the political.
For Coy and Henry
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INTRODUCTION:
JUSTICE, LOVE AND RELATION IN SIMONE WEIL

“Love,” writes Fernando Pessoa, “demands identification with something different, which isn’t possible in logic, much less in real life.”¹ According to Simone Weil, this fundamental problem is precisely what makes justice nearly impossible for those who are suffering from oppression. For Weil, justice is coextensive with the presence of a love that—logic and life notwithstanding—is capable of identifying with someone different, while refraining from the kind of objectification or appropriation that so often accompanies such an identification. Weil hardly can be accused of rosy optimism in her evaluation of the chances of justice being done in the realm of the everyday. Yet she rejects the notion that justice is merely a pleasant delusion or a fanciful unreality, arguing that “justice cannot be that. We know it experimentally... and if justice is inerasable from the heart of Man, it must have a reality in this world.”² At certain moments, however—in the midst of a brutal year spent doing piecework in factories, nearing the end of her life in exile from France without hope of returning—Weil herself asked just how, and to what extent, justice might find purchase in a world governed by a relentless and incomprehensible network of forces—something she calls “necessity” in partial continuity with the Platonic tradition. This dissertation, the fruit of a serious encounter with Weil’s thought, represents an attempt to answer that question,

along with several other questions about the nature of human beings and the character of reality, that become important when one wishes to identify justice with love, and to make a radical political stance of “being-for-the-other” cohere with a mysticism that seeks to dissolve the self entirely.

Burgeoning interest in Weil’s life and thought in recent years has borne fruit in a number of interesting and important new books and articles by authors writing specifically about Weil in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, political science, theology, feminist theory, and religious studies. This project is intended as a contribution to that literature, but it is also intended to bring Weil’s ideas—particularly those concerned with the relational character of the human being and of the world in which humans are embedded—beyond the sometimes insular scholarship devoted to Weil’s work and into a broader conversation that includes thinkers as diverse as Heidegger, Plotinus, Descartes, Catherine Keller, Irigaray, and Arendt among others. The purpose of staging such an encounter between Weil’s ideas and those of other important intellectuals across disciplines and eras is not only to demonstrate the supple and engaging relevance of Weil’s thought for those who are interested in these thinkers—though that is something I hope to achieve—but also to take certain themes and concepts in Weil’s thought and push them perhaps further than Weil herself might have anticipated, though without doing them violence, in order to employ them for ends which are at the heart of her own work: namely, a re-imagined political milieu infused with and nurtured by a Christian mysticism of the everyday.

It has become a truism in most recent writing on Weil that the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical, the mystical and the political, exist for her not
merely alongside one another, but in fact in a structure of mutual interpenetration, such that it becomes impossible, in the end, to tease apart one aspect from the other. Weil herself, in her lengthy political treatise *The Need for Roots*, argues against what she terms a “spurious mysticism, spurious contemplation” of the sort that flees from concrete obligations to others in the world; she insists instead that “[i]t is only through things and individual beings on this earth that human love can penetrate to that which lies beyond.”

While some critics consider this interpenetration be intensely problematic or at least ineffective, I argue that it is precisely in and through this permeability that Weil’s critique of power gains its force, and that her constructive proposal for what amounts to a kind of political theology—or theologically-inflected politics—derives its strength. Earlier efforts to identify and assess the connection that Weil is able to make between these two seemingly divergent facets of human experience have tended to focus on her biography as the principal source of that linkage; that is, many interpreters have looked to Weil’s rigorous attempts to enact at a personal and existential level the political and spiritual ideas she develops at the theoretical level. The results of such biographically-focused analyses have been uneven at best. In the first place, their ability to contribute broadly to constructive political, theological, and philosophical projects is limited, since one would have to live a life very much like Weil’s if the unity of the mystical and the political is grounded solely in the particular—and particularly strenuous—decisions and actions Weil pursued in her life. More significantly, these kinds of analyses only rarely manage to avoid the extremes of either hagiography or vilification in their assessment of Weil’s life and thought; at either extreme, the importance and the uniqueness of Weil’s ideas are overlooked in the effort to assimilate Weil to a specific ideological position—reactionary,

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3 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 158.
fascist, communist, bourgeois, anti-feminist, proto-feminist, self-hating Jew, saint, ultra-orthodox, gnostic, liberal (to name just a few)—and then evaluate that position rather than Weil’s actual intellectual contributions. This is not uncommon, particularly in the case of women intellectuals, and yet it is a method that will be resisted resolutely in this project; I am interested in demonstrating the significance of Weil’s thought on its own terms, without recourse to psychologizing it or interpreting it solely in the context of a particular ideology. Indeed, one rationale for bringing her ideas into contact with such a diverse array of theorists is precisely to avoid the kinds of pitfalls into which certain other treatments of Weil have fallen. For, if anything can be claimed with any certainty about Weil, it is that she is a thinker without a home: for her, the “special function of the intelligence requires total liberty, implying the right to deny everything, and allowing of no domination.”

My intention, then, is to locate the connection between the mystical and the political, not in the intensity with which Weil manifested that connection in her life, as compelling (or as disturbing) as that may be to so many; but rather, in the crucially important concept of relationality as it applies both to the individual and to the world. Weil herself makes this fascinating claim:

> We have in us and about us only relationships. In the semi-darkness in which we are plunged, all is relation for us, as in the light of reality all is in itself divine mediation. Relationship is divine mediation glimpsed through our darkness... We know that we live in divine mediation, not as fish in the sea but as a drop of water in the sea. In us, outside us, here below, in the Kingdom of God, nowhere is there any other thing. And mediation is exactly the same thing as Love.

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This notion—that in us and around us there is nothing other than relation, and that relation, or divine mediation, is simply love—serves as the focus of this dissertation. According to Weil, both the human being and the universe in which we are embedded are constituted, not by fixed distinctions between subject and object or substance and accident, but instead, by relationship itself. I argue that it is Weil’s radically relational vision of the human being that lies at the center of a reinvented metaphysical project, the foundation of which is not the classic metaphysical apparatus of substance and accident, but rather, the category of relation, which replaces substance, and which reconfigures formerly static depictions of the self in terms of energy and mediation. In Weil’s understanding, the self possesses the illusion of substantial existence, and this imaginative illusion allows the individual under normal circumstances to behave as if others were no more than means for the fulfillment of the self’s desires and needs. As a result, injustice and the ever-expanding exercise of power are everywhere and in every case the rule.

According to Weil, the self can become authentically relational only through having undergone the process of “decreation,” in which one’s perspective—normally fixed egoistically upon the ways in which the rest of the world exists on account of and for the self—is forced to shift outward, and to be re-centered upon what is external to the self. The normal state of the autonomous self is one of egoist usurpation of God’s perspective. The decreated self, however, has relinquished the egoist position, and possesses the capacity “to love everything without distinction.”6 The decreated self, no longer caught up in the imaginative error that it occupies the central point in the universe,

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is now capable of relating authentically and intensely to others and of reaching out to those who are afflicted and oppressed. Indeed, as Miklos Vetö observes, decreation “reduces the human being to nothingness, but curiously this reduction implies an ‘intensification’ of our reality.” ⁷ This intensification entails a kind of mysticism which fuels not the isolation or independence of the hermit-recluse, but rather the increased capacity for engagement with the world in all its beauty and with other human beings, particularly those in need. It is this notion of the decreated, relational self which permits Weil to bridge the mystical and the political and to tether her radical political ideas concerning justice, labor, and the obligation to the other to a stable and yet extraordinarily dynamic and supple metaphysics in which relation—or divine mediation—is the primary category.

Important questions remain, however. To what extent is the “unselving” which Weil enjoins free from the charge that it diminishes personal responsibility and enshrines a fatalistic consent to the status quo? By what means does decreation take place? How, precisely, does Weil’s form of mysticism avoid collapsing into an otherworldly and disembodied flight from the everyday, or being reduced to an emotivist over-valuation of love at the expense of reason? How does Weil’s ethical imperative for the individual translate into a political theory that holds good for the larger nation or group? In order to answer these questions, Weil’s concept of relationality must be conjugated through a series of important contexts: her Christian Platonist metaphysics, her understanding of embodiment, technology, and ethics, the centrality of affliction and labor for the process of decreation, and the mystical-political convertibility of justice and love.

The first chapter of the dissertation focuses on Weil’s underlying metaphysical commitments, and addresses relationality in terms of necessity and the structures of the universe. My intention here is to examine closely Weil’s relationship to Platonism, Neoplatonism, and a kenotic reading of God as a means of showing just how her understanding of relationality as constitutive of the world leads her to develop a cosmology that is free from the problems of a classic substance-based metaphysics in which relation is only marginally important, and being is understood as presence. There are three principal issues in this chapter: divine kenosis as that which shapes the cosmos, necessity as a doubled structure constituted by relation, and the function and place of matter—especially chora—in Weil’s metaphysics. Through a staged encounter with Plotinus’ account of necessity and materiality on the one hand, and with the account of chora in both Derrida and Cixous on the other, it becomes possible to see, not only how Weil understands necessity as relation, but also how this understanding opens up a space for a feminist reading of decreative self-gift.

According to Weil, this capacity of the subject to consent to decreation depends upon the relational structure of the universe—a structure in which the subject herself is fully implicated. If Weil’s concept of the self is one that considers autonomous subjectivity to be an obstacle that prevents the operation of justice, then it is important to understand just how her notion of the relational self manages to avoid becoming mired in the egoist illusion of substantial existence. As the second chapter proposes, Weil understands the human being as a unity of matter and spirit; in developing this notion, she is influenced by a variety of sources, including Plato, Descartes, Kant, and the Stoics, while nevertheless shifting the emphasis of these classic models of subjectivity into an
embodied and incarnational register in which the encounter with the world and with others is mediated by the body and the senses. The resulting ethical imperative—something Weil understands as an absolute and unconditioned obligation to serve the needs of the other in concrete ways—has been compared with Emmanuel Levinas’ absolutizing ethical position by many scholars. Yet I argue that the structures of mediation which subtend her vision of the subject, along with her emphasis on embodiment, in fact bring her concept of ethics closer to that of Luce Irigaray.

This unconditional obligation is the focus of the third chapter, in which Weil’s claim that affliction can be a means of decreation—and hence, a means by which “supernatural justice” is manifested—is examined. According to Weil, the locus of human freedom is the capacity to consent to decreation; on account of the power it has to strip the subject of its pretensions and illusions, affliction serves as a prominent mechanism for effecting decreation. Only when this process has taken place can the subject—now a kind of non-subject—see others on their own terms and bring justice to bear despite any natural inequalities that might be present. However, the dangers implicit in such a view—particularly for women and other groups who, throughout most of history, have not been recognized as subjects in the first place—must be addressed, since some critics, not without cause, see in decreation a masochistic violence which threatens the self’s political and personal agency. At this juncture, Weil’s ideas will be brought into dialogue with feminist philosophical theologian Catherine Keller, paying heed in particular to Keller’s theological anthropology as a resource for reinterpreting and extending Weil’s own anthropology. It is my belief that such a juxtaposition will aid in
reading Weil less reductively, and with a clearer eye to the possibilities presented by decreation for ethical and political engagement with the other.

Affliction is not the only mechanism in Weil’s thought that can bring about the process of decreation. While chapter three deals principally with affliction and decreation, the fourth chapter introduces Weil’s idea of a mysticism of work, and draws attention to her claim that, under proper conditions, labor might also be a means for the subject’s decreation. Before focusing specifically upon labor and decreation in chapter five, however, it is important to examine the potential problems that Weil sees in establishing the kind of conditions under which labor might be a source of dignity and meaning instead of the deracinating and oppressive experience it is in so many cases. Thus chapter four proposes to look at technology and labor in order to come to grips with Weil’s assessment of technology as something which has the potential to be liberative, but which so often becomes a means of enslavement for most workers. Bringing Weil’s critique of technology and bureaucritization into dialogue with Heidegger’s similar critique will highlight the particular hope Weil has for technology, not as a Heideggerian reconstitution of subjectivity or a mode of world-disclosing poiesis, but instead as a mode of encounter with necessity through which subjectivity is decreated. It is the decreative process that permits the subject to relate justly to the other even in conditions of injustice, and to resist the dehumanizing effects of rationalized technology.

Moving from Weil’s assessment of technology to a broader analysis of her treatment of labor, the fifth chapter focuses in particular on the relationship between Weil’s mysticism of labor and anarchism, and on the role played by attention in the development of a form of labor that can serve as the basis for a just political milieu.
According to Weil, labor—in which the subject meets with reality and participates in what she often calls “non-acting action”—allows the subject to link thought with action in the practice of what she calls attention that promotes self-forgetfulness and the attenuation (and eventual defeat) of all-consuming desire. It is in this way that labor can bring about the decreation of the self. Thus, it is Weil’s decreative theological anthropology that allows her to establish labor at the center of a re-envisioned political milieu in which the ethical and the political are convertible, since labor operates simultaneously as a spiritual and a political category for her. In order to understand Weil’s vision of labor in the context of political life, her thought is juxtaposed with that of Proudhon, whom she admired greatly, but from whom she diverges in her much deeper suspicion of the inescapable nature of the exercise and abuse of power. Finally, staging an encounter between Weil and Hannah Arendt on the twin issues of political agency and justice considered under the form of love will help to draw attention to the importance of love, not only for the ethics of the individual, but for the justice present in the vital milieu of the nation.

In the end, then, this dissertation is an attempt to shine a light on Weil’s nuanced, complex analysis of power and her development of a relational metaphysic and theological anthropology, with the goal of showing just how fruitful these positions are for a mystical-political stance in which love and justice are one and the same. Through Weil’s thought, one discovers this overlap between love and justice, the mystical and the political—an overlap which the grasping intentionality of the self cannot possibly comprehend under ordinary circumstances in which others are reduced to insubstantial and shadowy things to be used as fuel for the ego’s desires. According to Weil, “Belief
in the existence of other human beings as such is love,”\(^8\) and such a belief only comes about, she explains, by means of “a spiritual quartering, a stripping of the self, conceiving oneself as oneself and another.”\(^9\) The love for the other which comes into being by means of such an unselfing—a love which Weil sometimes calls attention—is the kind of love that gives rise to justice, and that in fact \textit{is} justice according to Weil’s vision of the political milieu.

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CHAPTER 1:

THE ABANDONED KINGDOM: THE WORLD AS THE REALM OF NECESSITY

“O dreary life,” we cry, “O dreary life!”
And still the generations of the birds
Sing through our sighing, and the flocks and herds
Serenely live while we are keeping strife
With Heaven’s true purpose in us, as a knife
Against which we may struggle! Ocean girds
Unslackened the dry land, savannah-swards
Unweary sweep, hills watch unworn, and rife
Meek leaves drop yearly from the forest-trees
To show, above, the unwasted stars that pass
In their old glory: O thou God of old,
Grant me some smaller grace than comes to these!—
But so much patience as a blade of grass
Grows by, contented through the heat and cold.10

I. Being as Metaxu: Weil’s Reinvention of Platonic Metaphysics

The poetic self in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s petition for some portion of the patient obedience exhibited by the material world—grass and waves, stars and hills—seems to be a response to the human experience of malaise and disquiet, limitation and constraint, strife and sighing. Consciousness is the peculiarly human burden; though it is what sets us free from quotidian struggles and differentiates us from other entities in the universe by offering us self-awareness, novelty, and possibility, it is also the site of our discontent, and the source of our onerous and lifelong striving. Human beings cry out against the dreariness of life, and resist “Heaven’s true purpose” which seems less like grace than like a weapon; meanwhile, nature goes about its business following fate or

providence with no sign of protest, no rebellious rumbling against the injustice of it all, no strenuous attempt to discern the reasons behind destruction or perdurance. Simone Weil, like Browning’s poetic self, claims that we would be better off imitating nature’s patient obedience:

> It is because absence of any finality or intention is the essence of the beauty of the world that Christ told us to behold the rain and the light of the sun, as they fall without discrimination upon the just and the unjust. This recalls the supreme cry of Prometheus: ‘The heavens, where the common orb of day revolves for all.’ Christ commands us to imitate this beauty. Plato also in the *Timaeus* counsels us through contemplation to make ourselves like to the beauty of the world, like to the harmony of the circular movements that cause day and night, months, seasons, and years to succeed each other and return.\(^\text{11}\)

This mandate to abandon autonomy, freedom, and consciousness in an effort to imitate the blind, non-conscious obedience of matter to the laws of the universe rings strange in modern ears, for this ceding of self-direction—and the concomitant yielding up of any guaranteed access to final causality—seems to run counter to the gradual and hard-won accumulation in modernity of selfhood, agency, and the consciousness of a kingdom of ends that offers some kind of ethical if not metaphysical teleology.

Yet Weil and Barrett Browning—moderns both—see the non-conscious obedience to heaven manifested by the material universe as something to be desired, sought for, and gained. Behind this lies a deeper purpose, at least for Weil: the attempt to define and locate the self in terms of a “metaphysical expression of the mystic way.”\(^\text{12}\)

That is, Weil’s anthropology is rooted in a reconfigured metaphysical project the vocabulary and inflection of which is Platonic and Neoplatonic, but the motive force of which is in many ways aligned with Christian mysticism. In a post-Heideggerian theological and philosophical landscape concerned not only with overthrowing

\(^{11}\) Weil, *Waiting for God*, 177.

Platonism, but also with dismantling all forms of ontotheology, Weil’s attempt to reconstruct a Christian, Platonist metaphysics might initially appear to be nothing more than nostalgia (at best), or the posturing of a reactionary aestheticism intent upon upholding beauty as the mark and guarantor of order and the status quo. I argue, however, that Weil’s Christian Platonism is not the substance-metaphysics criticized by everyone from Whitehead to Derrida, in which being is considered as presence, teleology becomes a kind of triumphalism, and relationality is a marginal or even non-existent concept. Rather, Weil’s Platonic metaphysics is, as Emmanuel Gabellieri claims, “a philosophy of the constituent bond between reason and love, a philosophy of being as metaxu, link, mediation, and finally, a philosophy of the fullness of being as supernatural love.”

The prayer for the serene patience of a blade of grass in Barrett Browning’s poem, echoed by Weil’s call to imitate the material realities of the cosmos in their obedience to the laws of necessity, is not a nostalgic appeal to a premodern metaphysics of presence and a concomitant quietist, essence-based anthropology and ethics; rather, it is a precept that lies at the heart of Weil’s effort to reconfigure in radical fashion the structure and function of classic metaphysics in order to envision new possibilities for a dynamic, relational ethics and anthropology.

This chapter will serve as an exploration of what lies behind and beneath Weil’s claim that we must emulate matter: namely, necessity, the creation of the universe, and the structure of the cosmos. In order to understand Weil’s significant contributions to theological anthropology, ethics, and—ultimately—a mystical-political theology, it will

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prove indispensable to begin here with an examination of the broader cosmological or metaphysical commitments which operate as touchstones for key concepts of hers such as decreation, labor, energy, affliction, and enrootedness. To get at the heart of these commitments later, I will address here three significant issues. First, I will explore Weil’s interpretation of God’s power and the relinquishing of that power in the act of creating the universe. Limited attention will be given to the Trinitarian shape of God’s kenotic act of creation, and to Weil’s understanding of God’s kenosis as it plays out in the Incarnation and the Passion as well. Next, I will explain the outcome of that act of creation—necessity and the material universe—and make clear the manner in which necessity operates as a stand-in for God and God’s abandoned power. At this point it will be important to look in detail at necessity: its mechanism, its doubled form, and the significance it holds for human beings living within its structures of power. Questions about the nature of necessity must be addressed here: Should necessity be characterized as the intelligible yet rigidly determinative order of the universe, or as brute, blind, almost unintelligible force? Is necessity a kind of object with a reality outside ourselves, or is it a construct of our mental processes or perceptions? Is there a difference between the necessity that Weil seems to see operating in the social, human sphere and that which seems to function in the world of matter and the cosmos? Finally, I will look more closely at necessity’s relation to matter, along with necessity’s “base” (as Weil terms it), which is chora. Examining Weil’s thought here in connection with Platonic conceptions of matter and being/non-being, and with contemporary philosophical analyses and appropriations of chora in terms of a feminine generosity, will prove helpful in elucidating her call for human beings to imitate the non-conscious world and its openness.
to obedience. Weil’s reading of *chora* is significant, I will argue, precisely because it is one of the developments which permits her to re-interpret the classic metaphysical concepts of being, non-being, and cosmos in terms of energy, kenosis, and relation.

II. The Self-Emptying God: The Passion as Interpretive Key

In typically succinct and vigorous fashion, Weil recapitulates the classic problem of evil: “God is the author of all; God is only the author of good: we cannot escape from this dilemma.”\(^\text{14}\) It is important to realize that, for Weil, this dilemma is indeed an inescapable one, and that—at least to some extent—the cosmology she elaborates is not so much intended as a solution to the problem of evil, but rather, as a provisional gesture in service of her anthropology and ultimately, of her ethics. Nevertheless, Weil’s recognition of the intractability of this dilemma does not represent a facile retreat to fideism, triumphalistic givenness, or an esoteric mystification of cosmological structures. Nor is it a dismissal of the importance of the metaphysical underpinnings of ethics, since Weil, in the classic Platonic manner, ties ontology and ethics closely together by means of aesthetics.\(^\text{15}\) In order to reach an understanding of what Weil means in laying out the paradox of God’s divine authorship of all that is and yet simultaneously only that which is good, we must turn to Weil’s treatment of creation, for it is here that Weil lays the foundation for her conception of necessity.

\(^\text{14}\) Weil, *Notebooks*, 207.

\(^\text{15}\) “Indeed, there is no other key notion in Weil’s thought that better reveals a dual Platonic and Kantian heredity than her notion of the beautiful. From her earliest works, her treatment of the beautiful is strongly penetrated by strictly ethical elements, but it is only in the mature period that the influence of Platonism seems to win out. At this time aesthetic reflection appears in a characteristically ontological language; however, we believe that a ‘critical’ interpretation still remains possible…” (Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 90).
Weil’s understanding of the way in which power functions lies at the center of her understanding of the creation of the universe. Quoting Thucydides, she sets forth the law by which power always behaves:

‘Tradition teaches us as touching the gods and experience shows us as regards men that, by a necessity of nature, every being invariably exercises all the power of which it is capable’ (Thucydides). Like a gas, the soul tends to fill the entire space which is given it. A gas which contracted leaving a vacuum—this would be contrary to the law of entropy. It is not so with the God of the Christians. He is a supernatural God…

This principle—that power naturally and necessarily moves to fill every vacuum and to operate maximally at every moment in every circumstance—is central to Weil’s thought. God is supernatural precisely because God chooses not to exercise power according to this natural maxim. Instead, creation is for God “not an act of self-expansion but of restraint and renunciation. God and all his creatures are less than God alone. God accepted this diminution. He emptied a part of his being from himself. He had already emptied himself in this act of his divinity; that is why Saint John says that the Lamb had been slain from the beginning of the world.”

The implications of this notion are several: in the first place, that a refusal of power rather than the fullest exercise thereof becomes the most significant characteristic of divinity; in the second place, that the universe is somehow simultaneously a manifestation of God and wholly other than God; and in the third place, that this divestment of divine power has to do, not only with creation, but also with the Passion.

Indeed, Weil sees Jesus’ refusal to exercise power on the cross, not only as the culmination of the divine self-emptying that is begun in creation, but also as the

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foundation and interpretive key by which we are to understand the kenosis of creation. She claims that, in creating the universe, God “abandoned our entire being… God emptied himself. This word incorporates both creation and the Incarnation into the Passion.”\(^\text{18}\) Weil here is aligned with the ancient strand of the Christian theological tradition, arguably rooted in the kenosis hymn of Philippians, which envisions both creation and the Incarnation in terms of a divine self-abnegation, since in becoming human, Jesus turned away from the divine power that rightly was his and humbled himself profoundly. As Weil observes, “Already before the Passion, already by the Creation, God empties himself of his divinity, abases himself, takes the form of a slave.”\(^\text{19}\) The Incarnation as an act of divine humility has been interpreted by many Christian thinkers throughout the centuries as a source of physical and psychological suffering for Jesus, and therefore as an integral part of his Passion rather than a separate or separable christological event.\(^\text{20}\) It is the cross that provides the hermeneutic by which the kenotic acts of creation and the Incarnation become comprehensible and meaningful. This is what Weil means when she claims that “it was only on the cross that [Christ] became complete.”\(^\text{21}\) It is not that Weil sees Christ’s Passion as the only divine event of any importance, or that she conceives of Jesus as somehow not fully himself prior to the crucifixion; rather, she holds that creation and the incarnation are elements of “a schematization of divine activity which distinguishes and relates the various parts by the

\(^\text{20}\) See Philippians 2:5-11. There are too many examples of this manner of thought within various Christian theological traditions to list in any exhaustive way.
\(^\text{21}\) Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 132.
ultimate criteria of Christ’s Cross.” In all these divine events—creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion—the central feature is a divine refusal to exercise power. This is not a refusal simply for the sake of refusing. Nor is it a supernatural event utterly lacking relevance for the daily actions of human beings in the natural order. According to Weil, the motive force behind this divine renunciation is God’s love for creation.

Because Weil understands creation as a sacrifice or a diminishment on God’s part—God’s bringing into existence something that is other than divine perfection and goodness—it is neither an occasion for God’s expansion, nor the manifestation of divine glory and grandeur made visible and tangible in created entities. In other words, “it is not the power of God that spills over into creation, but his love, and this overflow is a veritable diminution.” This notion permits Weil to develop the Trinitarian dimensions of the act of creation and retain the classical role of Christ as the principle of creation—“through Him all things are made”—while nevertheless redefining this role in certain crucial ways. For Weil, the creation of the universe of matter, time and space as an act of divine self-sacrifice entails a separation between God and God. In the love and friendship among the persons of the Trinity there is infinite nearness, which Weil interprets along traditional lines as the perfect identity of the persons of the Trinity.

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23 Vetö, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 12. In connection with this point, Vetö notes the similarities between Weil’s view and that of the Kabbalist notion of Tzimtzum (the self-limitation or absenting of God in the act of creation)—more specifically with the development of Tzimtzum by Isaac Luria’s disciple Chaim Vital in the direction of divine self-abnegation out of love. Like Vital, and unlike Luria, Weil insists that, “Because he is the creator, God is not all-powerful. Creation is abdication. But he is all-powerful in this sense, that his abdication is voluntary. He knows its effects, and wills them” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 120).
24 Weil writes, “Of all the attributes of God, only one is incarnated in the universe, in the body of the Word; it is beauty. The presence of beauty in the world is the experimental proof of the possibility of incarnation” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 83). Here, Christ as Logos is the ordering principle and structure of the world, much as he is in the Creed.
But resulting from the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion, there is also infinite distance. The totality of space and the totality of time, interposing their immensity, put an infinite distance between God and God... This universe where we are living, and of which we form a tiny particle, is the distance put by Love between God and God. We are a point in this distance. Space, time, and the mechanism that governs matter are the distance.25

This means that, for Weil, the universe itself and we who are part of it constitute an obstacle to the union of love between God and God. It is in spite of this divine rending—and thus purely out of love—that God brings the universe into being.

According to Weil, the notion that the universe exists because of God’s self-abnegating love is intimately connected to the notion that God is Trinitarian in character. She observes that, “The Father is creation of being, the Son is renunciation of being; this double pulsation is one single act which is Love or Spirit. When humility gives us a part in it, the Trinity is in us. This exchange of love between the Father and the Son passes through creation. All we are asked to do is to consent to its passing through. We are nothing else but this consent.”26 When we fail to give this consent—in other words, to cede the autonomy that permits us to persist in the illusion that we are centers of power—we obstruct the passage of love between God the Father and God the Son. When we choose to consent, however, we begin the process of decreation, a process through which we imitate God in renouncing our being and power. This is always a costly course of action for the human being, since power, by virtue of its nature, seeks everywhere to expand and devour; checking this movement outward is to check one’s very existence.

Refusing to exercise power entails refusing the continuation and growth of one’s being: “Not to exercise all the power at one’s disposal is to endure the void.”27 If one endures

26 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 102.
27 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 163.
the void and consents to the passage of love between God and God, then “[b]y assimilation with the Christ, who is one with God, the human being, lying in the depths of his misery, attains a sort of equality with God, an equality which is love.”28 The possibility of this assimilation with Christ exists on account of Christ’s presence in the universe as mediation—as “that key which locks together the Creator and creation.”29 Yet Christ’s mediating presence is neither a straightforward manifestation nor an unambiguous and comforting certainty which might be remarked by anyone in all circumstances. Rather, this presence is more nearly an absence which is experienced by creatures, not as love, but as necessity.

III. Necessity: A Coin with Two Faces

Weil’s concept of necessity is complex and nuanced, drawing inspiration from sources as diverse as Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus; Descartes and Kant; Marx; the Gospels; and developments in physics pertaining to entropy and dark matter.30 Yet there are two fundamental aspects of necessity which serve as the anchors for much of what Weil has to say on the subject: necessity in the guise of brutal and unintelligible might, and necessity in the guise of relentless and intelligible mechanism. According to Weil, “One must tenderly love the harshness of that necessity which is like a coin with two faces, the one turned towards us being domination, and the one turned towards God, obedience.”31 Insofar as human beings are hybrid creatures composed of an inseparable

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29 Ibid., 195.
and wholly interpenetrating mixture of matter and spirit (or intelligence), they possess the capacity to see both of these aspects.

Though Weil from time to time employs the terms “necessity” and “force” (translated by some as “might”) interchangeably, it is helpful to pay attention to differences in their respective senses in order to achieve a clearer understanding of two distinct aspects of necessity. As partly material entities, human beings come into contact with brute force on a regular basis, and this contact gives rise to the notion of force as blind, capricious, unintelligible and ungovernable in spite of humanity’s best efforts to tame, justify, and explain it. Weil observes that the “human soul never ceases to be modified by its encounter with might, swept on, blinded by that which it believes itself able to handle, bowed beneath the power of that which it suffers… Might is that which makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway.”

And there is no one, claims Weil, who does not at some time or another—indeed, at most times—come under its sway. It has the power to enslave, to kill, and to make the living into a kind of undead, and its effects are present alike in those who attempt to appropriate it for their own purposes and in those who merely shrink before it. As Weil expresses it, might’s “power to transform man into a thing is double and it cuts both ways; it petrifies differently but equally the souls of those who suffer it, and of those who wield it.”

To experience force is to experience naked power; the notion that one might safely employ such force while maintaining a prophylactic distance from its capacity to destroy and enslave oneself as well as others is purely illusory. It is not precisely fate or fortune (in the Boethian sense) which Weil describes in her many discussions of brute force. Force is not a

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33 Ibid., 173.
revolving wheel that carries one up and then down without any real predictability, although, to be sure, Weil’s notion of might is similarly—and terrifyingly—arbitrary. What distinguishes Weil’s understanding of might is that at every moment, all human beings are subject to it, whether or not they are aware of it. The heady and intoxicating experience of being at the top of the wheel—of being in command of force, of being able to control it or even simply benefit from it—is a chimera, for the attempt to wield power is simultaneously to be damaged by it and made over into an object. It is to be transformed into a mere means by which power operates in the universe; those who are strong “never guess as they exercise their power, that the consequences of their acts will turn back upon themselves.”

When this occurs, as it inevitably must, those who are accustomed to wielding power will find themselves just as weak and feeble as those whom they formerly oppressed. What is more, their profligate use of might in the past will have so diminished their capacity for compassion and justice that they will be utterly unfit to contend with their new experience of brutality. Weil insists, then, that humans largely experience force as something baffling and ungovernable, a source of affliction and wretchedness.

Yet it is also the case, claims Weil, that human beings encountering the universe possess the capacity to see something beneath or beyond an encompassing brute force. After all, she asks, “How should blind force be able to produce [the] circles,” patterns, trajectories, and physical and mathematical laws which manifest themselves in the cosmos (literally, “order”)? These regulative configurations—and our ability to perceive them—suggest the presence of something in the universe that constrains the brute power

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of might. “The Pythagoreans used to say that the universe is constructed out of indeterminateness and the principle that determines, limits, arrests. It is the latter which is always dominant.”

Human beings are always subject to the destructive caprice of blind force, and this is particularly the case with respect to the body, which is so often experienced as the locus of pain, change, violence, and senescence. Yet the intelligence perceives something at work in the seemingly arbitrary series of becomings and annihilations occasioned by might:

> Like the oscillation of the waves, the whole succession of events here below, made up, as they are, of variations in balance mutually compensated—births and destructions, waxings and wanings—render one keenly alive to the invisible presence of a plexus of limits without substance and yet harder than any diamond. That is why things are beautiful in their vicissitudes, although they allow one to perceive a pitiless necessity. Pitiless, yes; but which is not force, which is sovereign ruler over all force.

Weil makes a distinction here between the arbitrary brutality of force and the necessity which governs it. Necessity as she describes it here comprises the pure and abstract relations that serve as the underlying structure of the universe. “Seen from this angle, necessity loses all its numinous...connotation and offers itself to the contemplative eye or the intellect of the scholar like the crystalline clarity of the intelligible.”

Experienced as might, a wave may appear to the swimmer as monstrous, as a tremendous and unpredictable force which threatens at every moment to overmaster and drown his tired, flagging body. That he escapes seems to him to be inexplicable—the result of chance, and not at all something to be relied on during future swims. Yet to the intelligence, the same wave can be seen as something that is perfectly obedient to the ordered laws—gravity, mathematical equations describing curves, seasonal tidal

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36 Ibid., 287.
37 Ibid., 288.
movements—governing the universe as a whole. For the thinking being, such a wave is nothing at all like the seemingly malevolent and capricious force out to destroy the hapless swimmer; rather, it is something that can be described, comprehended, and located within the rest of the ordered universe. As Weil expresses it, “The operation of the intellect in scientific study makes sovereign necessity over matter appear to the mind as a network of relations which are immaterial and without force.”39 The mind possesses the capacity to perceive necessity—an ordered, immaterial system of relations—as the intelligible, governing structure imposed upon (or organizing from within) what otherwise would appear to be only the blind might of chaos and unconstrained power.

Of course, Weil recognizes the fundamental problem with this notion: the application of the intelligence by the swimmer in the midst of a brutal maelstrom is hardly to be expected. The drowning swimmer is all too aware of the oppressive forces threatening to fill his lungs with water and break his head against the rocks, while he is unlikely in those desperate moments to be thinking of sine curves and the moon’s gravitational pull. Nevertheless, Weil insists that it is at least possible to develop the habit of contemplating blind force in such a way that the intellect is capable of perceiving the abstract relations of necessity within and beyond the apparent brutality of force. However, these relations can only be “present to the understanding as a result of a pure and lofty concentration emanating from a part of the mind not subjected to force. The part of the human mind that is subjected to force is that part which finds itself under the sway of needs. One has to forget entirely all about needs in order to conceive the relations in their immaterial purity.”40 So long as one is concerned principally with the

40 Ibid.
ungovernable and oppressive experience of might and the needs it engenders, then one cannot perceive the mechanical and intelligible order of necessity to which might is subject. It may be argued, however, that such levels of concentration are unachievable, and that no human being, when thrust into an experience of affliction, violence, or oppression, could maintain the kind of intellectual detachment required to identify necessity above and within the chaotic play of brute force.

Yet this is precisely what Weil claims we must do if we are to find a way out of the despair and dehumanization that we experience (and transmit to those who are weaker) in our encounter with might. She does not make this claim casually, without due consideration of its difficulty. Indeed, she readily acknowledges that it appears to be wholly impossible, since as beings who are simultaneously material and intellectual—and for whom the body is always a privileged point of contact with the world rather than something to be transcended⁴¹—to require the intellect to abstract from the material world in such a radical fashion seems absurd. Yet this absurdity—this impossibility—is precisely the point, according to Weil:

> When something seems impossible to obtain despite every effort, it is an indication of a limit which cannot be passed on that plane and of the necessity for a change of level—a break in the ceiling. To wear ourselves out in efforts on the same level degrades us. It is better to accept the limit, to contemplate it and savour all its bitterness.⁴²

Insofar as human beings are material, they will struggle against the brutality of force; just as the material world, lacking a discursive intellect, is wholly obedient to the relational structures of necessity, so also are human beings “perfectly obedient in so far as they are

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⁴¹ See Ch. 2 for a discussion of this point. ⁴² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 87-8.
mater” when they refrain from employing their intellect in the contemplation of the universe. Yet in attempting the impossible task of applying the discursive intellect even while experiencing the oppressive domination of blind force, the human being comes up against the limit of what is possible by means of her own power. This encounter with limit is precisely what enables her to move from one plane—the plane of brutal and capricious might—to another, higher plane—that of necessity and ordered relation.

This “movement” from one plane to the next is not a movement in the sense of a complete change of location, or a physical departure from the constraints of force. Because humans are embodied beings, they can never entirely cease to experience necessity in terms of blind and brutal power. Yet by means of intellectual contemplation, they can achieve a shift in perception, such that the side of necessity which is order and relation becomes visible and comprehensible. Observes Weil, “The side which it turned to us before, and still presents to almost the whole of our being, the natural part of ourselves, is brute domination. The side which it presents after this operation, to the fragment of our mind which has passed to the other side, is pure obedience… But the possibility of such a change in point of view is inconceivable without experience.”

That is, humans must acquire the habit, through practices which will in part include the body, of employing the intellect in the contemplation of the “brute domination” that seems so overwhelming.

Even so, cautions Weil, that intellectual operation represents only a tiny portion of who we are as creatures of both matter and intellect. For that reason, our encounter with force and our perception of the necessity to which it is ultimately obedient can

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43 Weil, The Need for Roots, 289.
never be parsed neatly and clearly into categories of “before” and “after,” or of “material force” and “relational necessity.” The distinction between force and necessity looks less like the total cleavage of two things—conceptually or really—and more like a hinge that pivots in this or that direction depending on its orientation and the force which moves it. As Weil expresses it, “Necessity is for matter the intersection of obedience to God and of the brute force which subdues creatures. At this same level of the intersection, necessity participates in intelligence, in justice, in beauty and in faith.” Human beings, who are simultaneously and inseparably material and intellectual entities, are located exactly at this point of intersection. It is on this account that they are able to perceive and participate in the relational network that constitutes necessity (and justice, beauty, and faith, which are its concomitants), all while experiencing themselves as subject to blind power. Movement between one plane and the other is not, then, a question of leaving the one behind in any physical or permanent sense. Moreover, even when one becomes capable of comprehending force in terms of necessity, such comprehension does not preclude the experience of necessity itself—despite the beauty of its ordered relationality—as relentless, harsh, and mechanically oppressive. On this point, Weil’s thought is aligned closely with a Plotinian version of Neoplatonic cosmology, in which blind force (called necessity by Plotinus) and the governing rational principle of the universe share a significant number of characteristics, perhaps most prominently a sort of utterly relentless, almost mechanical and categorical pervasiveness within the sensible world. On many occasions, Plotinus engages in a discussion of reason in which his intelligible, organizing principle of reason sounds remarkably like his brutal,

45 Ibid.
unintelligible necessity, and the reverse is true as well. For Weil, as for Plotinus, the ability to recognize this similarity and yet make a distinction between the two operations is one that must be nurtured through contemplative action and a will guided by intellectual attention.

At times, Weil appears to suggest that the shift from experiencing the universe merely as oppressive force to experiencing it as a network of ordered relations takes place entirely at the epistemological level. For example, she claims that “necessity is a combination of relations which fade away as soon as they are not sustained by a pure and lofty concentration on the part of the mind. This universe around us is made up of mind materially present in our flesh.” Elsewhere, Weil writes, “The necessary connections which constitute the very reality of the world have no reality in themselves except as the object of intellectual attention in action.” It would seem, then, that only brute force—that is, unintelligible matter or power—possesses genuine reality, and yet it is a reality about which one can know nothing except its arbitrariness, its impenetrability, and its dominance; the necessary relations which serve as the ordering structures of the universe are imposed (or superimposed) by the active intellect, and are not truly a feature of reality itself. Indeed, some readers of Weil suggest that her interpretation of necessity and force is not to be understood as having any purchase whatsoever for cosmological or metaphysical endeavors, and that the places in which she appears to speak of “a sort of super-necessity governing the relations between phenomena, analogous in kind to the

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46 For an excellent example of this type of discussion, see Plotinus, *Enneads* III.2,10;77 and III.2,15;89. In both of these passages, providential reason and brute necessity appear very much like one another.

47 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 293. This claim’s Kantian origins are obvious, although Weil’s particular configuration of mentality’s embeddedness within materiality is her own.

necessity relating our concepts, but never fully captured in our actual application of these concepts, “represent a “dangerous” confusion to which she “sometimes fall[s] prey.”

However, this so-called “confusion” is in fact precisely what Weil intends in her many reflections on necessity, and in order to read these reflections in such a way that all cosmological implications are left out and only analytic, linguistic, or conceptual implications remain, is to do significant violence to Weil’s thought. Indeed, as she writes,

Force is composed of relationships of necessity, relationships of condition to what is conditioned, and yet it possesses a reality outside and independent of mind. The discursive intelligence, which grasps relationships, the one that presides over mathematical knowledge, lies on the boundary between matter and spirit… The reality of matter lies in necessity, but we can only conceive of necessity by laying down clearly defined conditions.

In this passage, Weil makes clear that force is not utterly distinct from necessity, but is in fact composed of the network of conditioned relations that make up necessity. Necessity is an organizing structure for matter (force), and as such, is intelligible only via the discursive intelligence. Yet the reality of matter—and not merely the potential for comprehending it in terms of a superimposed intellectual operation—lies in necessity, as she insists. Weil’s position on the reality of necessity here is not inconsistent. This is because the distinction she makes between blind force on the one hand, and the necessity which structures and governs it on the other, is not a distinction that pertains to their status as real. Rather, the rule of an intelligible necessity and the oppression of unintelligible brute force are literally co-extensive; that is, they can be distinguished epistemologically or conceptually, and yet they occupy the same plane ontologically.

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50 Ibid.
For Weil, again following a Plotinian tendency here, this is neither a contradiction nor an absurdity. These two seemingly opposed principles—relentless order and impenetrable chaos—operate within a flexible, “telescoping” cosmology. Rather than functioning antagonistically as two opposed and warring principles or hypostases, force and necessity in fact occupy nearly the same place in Weil’s Plotinian cosmology.

This is not at all impossible given the elasticity of such a “telescoping” ontology and methodology. Methodologically speaking, this telescoping feature permits Weil to oscillate between higher and lower perspectives in order to ascertain peculiarities and attributes of a particular entity or event that are only discernible from one or the other perspective. Ontologically speaking, the telescoping feature permits her actually to understand a particular entity or force as simultaneously occupying—really and not merely perspectivally—the upper extremity of one rank and the lower extremity of the next. Such entities would be mutually interpenetrative: neither wholly separate nor of wholly distinct ontological orders. This conception is one she adapts from a Plotinian-style cosmology in which there exists a “dynamic continuity” from one hypostasis to another: “there is nothing between them, they are separated only by otherness; ‘neither cut off nor identical.’” This is the case since, according to Plotinus, “the physical world is a mirror image of the intelligible world. What is highest here turns out to be


53 See, for example, Plotinus’ own examples and explanations of this phenomenon, which demonstrate Weil’s affinities with Neoplatonic thinking. In one example, Plotinus expresses this concept in terms of the continuity of life: “It is then like a long life stretched out at length; each part is different from that which comes next in order, but the whole is continuous with itself, but with one part differentiated from another, and the earlier does not perish in the later” (Ennead V.2.2.24-9).

It is very much in this fashion that Weil understands might and
necessity to be operating, although she modifies the Plotinian notion of these principles
as hypostases, and instead interprets them dynamically as energies. Rather than
representing a dangerous confusion on the part of Weil, this strategic appropriation and
reinvention of Neoplatonic cosmology in fact represents a unique feature of her thought
which will permit her—as we shall see—to develop a cosmological structure that avoids
the traditional problems of ontotheology and a dualist metaphysics while nevertheless
remaining committed to some kind of metaphysical structure as a ground for her ethics
and anthropology.

For Weil, the epistemological and the ontological, the conceptual and the real, are
never truly opposed to each other, and are not to be understood as competing “tasks.”
This does not mean that Weil lifts whole-cloth the received (and somewhat crude)
interpretation of Plato in which concepts correspond directly and unproblematically to
things. Conceptual apparatuses are, in fact, constructions according to Weil, and thus
cannot be mapped naively onto some sort of “real” world that we behold and name. As
Eric Springsted notes,

> Vision and construction are not quite sharp alternatives, for they continually
> interact for Weil. The problem as Weil saw it is a perpetual one of how they
> interact and are ordered. We do continually construct. Kant was right in seeing
> this, she thought, and…this construction depends on historical factors… Vision
> and [construction] never leave the world. Rather we are always ‘reading’ the
> world… But if we are always reading and always have a perspective,…nevertheless for Weil there are levels, and one can move up
> through them.  

It is important to understand that, for Weil, this notion of superimposed readings and
movement through levels cannot be reduced to a confused or nostalgic reappropriation of

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pre-modern metaphysical concepts (such as emanation). Instead, it is an original means of bringing together a thoroughgoing perspectivalism and a realist cosmology without either hypostasizing being or beings, or rendering ethics—in a thick sense—impossible.

Much like Plotinus (and, arguably, like Plato), Weil conceives of God as a kind of One which is beyond being, and hence can be described in terms of non-being: “The One qua One doesn’t exist—God as purely One is God under the aspect of non-being, of a vacuum.” Of course, this has much in common with Plotinus’ apophatic depiction of the One as “formless (amorphon) and infinite (apeiron), without limitation or determination.” Because God is in some sense non-being, Weil insists that we cannot have access to God. Recall that, according to Weil, God, in creating the universe, withdraws; one cannot locate God in the sensible world, nor is there a straightforward means by which one may “get behind” the brute force we experience at the level of the senses. However, as we have seen, Weil affirms that it is at least possible that we can “read” the structures of necessity within and beyond blunt might. She insists, “Necessity is the veil of God. Superimposed readings: we should read necessity behind sensation, order behind necessity, and God behind order.” For Weil, there can be no access to a God who is absent. Yet one can move, by means of “superimposed readings”, from the experience of force in sensation to necessity which structures force; from necessity, to the concept of order (literally cosmos for Weil); and from order—finally—to God. Weil’s notion of reading (lecture) draws significantly on this conception of the universe as a

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57 Simone Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 319.
58 Bussanich, “Plotinus’s Metaphysics of the One,” 43. Plotinus uses the term amorphon in Ennead VI.7.17.17, 40, 33.4; and the term apeiron in Ennead V.5.10.18-22. As we will see, despite the fact that Plotinus employs the term apeiron to describe the unlimitedness of the One, both Weil and Plotinus will distinguish the non-being of the One from the non-being of chora (that is, the kind of non-being that is privative rather than excessive). Nevertheless, for Weil, divine non-being and choric non-being are not, perhaps, as far apart as might be supposed. This similarity will be taken up at the end of the chapter.
59 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 266.
telescoping reality composed of energies, and on her conception of the human being as capable of “reading” these telescoping energies:

Reading. All we are ever given (in a sense) is sensations, and whatever we may do about it we can never, never think anything else (in a sense) but sensations. But we can never actually think sensations; we read through them, as through a medium. What do we read? Not just anything at all, according to inclination. Nor, of course, something which does not depend in any way whatever on ourselves. The world is a text containing several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by an effort—an effort in which the body always participates.60

Here again it is possible to see that, for Weil, the ability to move from one level of the cosmological “text” to another is not merely a question of our epistemological or analytical constructions and the perspectival shift we enact by altering our standpoint; nor is it a movement that occurs without reference to our status as embodied beings who must, in some sense, make a physical and affective change in order to alter our reading. The goal, for Weil, is to read in God’s absence—and the relentless order of necessity which organizes the brute force we experience sensually—the God who is present to us only as absence and non-being. As she observes, this is all we will find if we seek to read divine providence behind brute force and ordered necessity; yet this is, after all, something: “It is not God’s Providence that is absent; it is by his Providence that God willed necessity as a blind mechanism.”61 The ability to read Providence behind and through necessity demands what Plotinus might call “another kind of seeing” or what Mark’s Jesus might call a form of hearing that is made available for those who have ears. This new way of seeing does not, however, involve us in a progressive forward motion by which we alter our landscapes or better the world. Rather, “it’s a question of passing

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from a personal perspective to an impersonal perspective. What changes is not the world, but ourselves. That is why…Weil can affirm that these readings are a pathway of deliverance."

However, one of the crucial characteristics that sets Weil’s conception of superimposed readings and levels of energy apart from a straightforwardly Neoplatonic position—and indeed, from any “thick” understanding of deliverance—is her refusal of all forms of final causality. Despite the fact that Weil employs the term “providence” in certain contexts, and at times even appears to suggest that the practice of “superimposed readings” permits one to break through force and necessity and approach the good beyond the world, she wishes in the end to foreclose the latent potential for triumphalism which is inherent in any really robust notion of providence. Indeed, she heartily resists what she often calls the “concept of Providence which corresponds to God after the Roman style,” namely, “a personal intervention in the world on the part of God in order to adjust certain means in view of certain particular ends.” For Weil, this interventionist conception of providence is a conception that can arise only on the basis of a human hubris which purports to be able to comprehend the divine will. Arguing that “[t]he idea of Providence diminishes the purity of the love of God,” she decries facile attempts to find evidence of providential will and divine benevolence in the workings of the world: “The good, which it is given to man to observe in the universe, is finite, limited. To endeavor to discern therein evidence of divine action is to turn God himself

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64 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 279. Indeed, Miklos Veto observes that “Weil always rose up violently against the notion of Providence insofar as it was taken to mean direct intervention of the prime cause in the functioning of secondary causes” (*The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, 15).  
into a finite, a limited good. It is a blasphemy."\(^{66}\) Although Weil and Plotinus share a quite similar concept of the One beyond being and the human desire for the good which is directed toward the One, Weil takes the apophatic emanationist mysticism of the Neoplatonists and extends the prohibition against speaking directly of the One/God by positing God’s voluntary withdrawal from the universe. God, in withdrawing, leaves behind necessity as the governing and organizing structure of the world. At best, if we are paying sufficient attention to see behind the experience of brute force, we have access only to necessity and its ordered network of relations, and it is about necessity and not God which we may speak. For this reason, Weil maintains that it is impossible to locate God (or the Good) directly or immediately in any part of the universe, since—as she frequently insists, citing the *Timaeus*—there is an infinite distance between necessity and the Good. Plotinus argues that providence, in assigning some entities to a better state than others, does so, not out of blind purposelessness, arbitrary cruelty, or a relentless working out of causal chains, but rather as a means of “bring[ing] forth beauty and justice”\(^{67}\) in the richly mixed and ultimately harmonious diversity of the sensible universe. Proper seeing, argues Plotinus, permits us to view the end toward which the means are directed. Weil instead argues that “[t]his world, the realm of necessity, offers us absolutely nothing except means. Our will is forever sent from one means to another like a billiard ball.”\(^{68}\) Although we may possess an inexhaustible desire for the good\(^{69}\)—a desire which cannot be satisfied except by the good which lies beyond being—all efforts to identify a providential will operating through finite goods to bring about beauty


\(^{67}\) Plotinus, *Ennead* III.2,13;85.

\(^{68}\) Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 133.

\(^{69}\) “The only thing which doesn’t ever become exhausted is my will to good.” (Weil, *Notebooks*, vol. 2, 491).
and justice risk justifying evil\textsuperscript{70} and making of these finite goods a false idol. Because
“God has committed all phenomena without exception to the mechanism of the world,”\textsuperscript{71} it follows for Weil that any intuition we may have of something divine that lies beyond this mechanism will usually be an imaginative illusion or a false consolation. Better by far, claims Weil, to exclude the possibility of such destructive illusions by affirming that, “If we think of God, that is not the good… The good represents for us a nothingness, since no thing is in itself good.”\textsuperscript{72} If good represents final causality for Weil, then it is not something which can be directly present in the world.

Nevertheless, like Plotinus, she continues to employ analogical and other kataphatic approaches to speaking about God when such approaches are called for, and her Trinitarian conceptions of Logos and the Spirit permit her to retain a kind of emanationist structure within the universe itself,\textsuperscript{73} while nevertheless insisting on the absolute lack of access to final causality. This is due in part to “her unshakable conviction, on the one hand, of the necessary character of everything that happens in the world, and on other of the fact that this necessity is but the face of God turned toward the universe.”\textsuperscript{74} It is in this Neoplatonic spirit, characterized by an elastic, telescopic verticality rather than a horizontal “layering” of levels,\textsuperscript{75} that one must interpret Weil’s more strongly-worded statements on providence. For instance, when Weil writes that “each event, each thing that takes place, whether it be fortunate, unfortunate or

\textsuperscript{70} Weil warns, “The distance between the necessary and the good: this is a subject for endless contemplation. It was the great discovery of Greece… Every attempt to justify evil by anything other than the fact that that which is is, is an offence against this truth” (Weil, \textit{Gravity and Grace}, 95).
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{72} Weil, \textit{Notebooks}, vol. 2, 491.
\textsuperscript{73} See Gabellieri, “Reconstructing Platonism,” 139-143.
\textsuperscript{74} Vetö, \textit{The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil}, 15.
\textsuperscript{75} Vetö explains: “A vertical continuity, and not a horizontal parallelism, is developed between the good and that which is bound to it by its order, necessity” (\textit{The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil}, 94).
unimportant from our own particular point of view, is a caress of God’s,”\textsuperscript{76} this is not to be understood as an avowal of God’s intervention or immediate direction of the affairs of the world. On the contrary, it is precisely because one cannot possibly identify any particular occurrence as providential that one must resort to calling every event providential. Weil extends this to its logical conclusion: namely, that it is better on the whole to behave as if there is no providential order in the world, since to call everything providential forecloses the possibility of any particular chain of events being singled out as having a direct divine cause.

Weil calls the adoption of such a stance of (dis)belief a form of purificatory atheism, arguing that, “God in so far as he exists, is the universe composed of phenomena. God, in so far as he is other than the universe, is other than existence.”\textsuperscript{77} For Weil, this means that God’s presence in and to the world—if one can speak of such a thing—is in no way immediate or direct. God cannot be said to exist. Rather, God’s abdication of power in creating the world leaves behind phenomenal existence (which we experience as a confrontation with brute force) and behind or within that, the inexorable and interconnected structures of necessity (which we only experience if we know how to move through our encounter with the phenomenal world). If, in searching for a god who transcends the phenomenal world and the order of necessity, we think we have found him, then what we have really found is a consoling illusion. Weil continues to resist a consolatory or triumphantist espousal of final causality while simultaneously affirming that the universe—experienced both as brute matter \textit{and} as relentless necessity or order—must be loved as an imprint or presence-via-absence of the divine:

\textsuperscript{76} Weil, \textit{Notebooks}, vol. 1, 322.
\textsuperscript{77} Weil, \textit{Notebooks}, vol. 1, 328.
The particular designs that are attributed to God are cuttings made by us from out of the more than infinite complexity of causal connections. We make them by connecting across time certain events with certain results produced by these events, chosen from among thousands of other possible ones. We are right when we declare these cuttings to be in conformity with the will of God. But the same would be just as true, and without any exception, of all the cuttings that could possibly be made by every sort of human or nonhuman intelligence, on no matter what scale of magnitude, throughout space and time, amid the complexity of the universe... One cannot cut out from the continuity of space and time an event as if it were like an atom; but the inadequacy of human language obliges one to talk as though one could.78

Human language requires that we speak of God or the good from time to time; nevertheless, Weil insists that such talk cannot possibly be indicative of an authentic or thoroughgoing “grasp” of providential activity. Nor can it serve as any genuine affirmation of God’s existence or presence in the world. When we think we have discerned such a thing, it is in reality nothing more than a “cutting”—an artificial process by which we selectively connect certain events in an effort to create a providential narrative. These narratives—products of the imagination—prevent us from seeing through brute force to the underlying order of necessity. Ultimately, constructing an artificial conception of providence keeps us from loving the universe as it is: namely, as a relational nexus of entities and events. As she muses in her notebooks, “[I]s there some providential harmony? It would seem not. To refuse to allow oneself to want to know this.”79 Artificial constructions of divine providence merely serve as consolations and justifications of the world’s comforting lies, and for Weil, a consolation that is bought at the cost of an authentic confrontation with the world is always bought too dearly. She writes, “Religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true faith: in this sense atheism is a purification.”80 It is better to act as if God is not present, claims

78 Weil, The Need for Roots, 283.
79 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 49.
80 Weil, Gravity and Grace, 104.
Weil, since a facile belief in God’s providential operation has been the source of much evil in history.

More must be said at this point about Weil’s conception of this relational universe. While it is clear that she understands the intellectual perception of necessity and the embodied experience of brute force as in some sense co-extensive realities, questions nonetheless remain about the status of the material world vis-à-vis the order of necessity, and about the distinctions—if any—between human beings as entities within this nexus and non-human entities which also form parts of this relational nexus. For Weil, the material world occupies an important place, both as an obstacle and corrective to the unfettered human will and as an intermediary through which the human being can come to love the world and those who live in it. She likens the material world to a “closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through.”81 Matter, when experienced in terms of force or obstruction, appears in the guise of that which stymies, thwarts, threatens and destroys. Yet, when approached and understood properly, it also becomes a transparent medium through which God’s love can pass, or a mirror which reflects God’s love for humans in and through the chaos of brute force and the rigorous order of necessity. This is due to the fact that matter, though it appears to humans as the sovereign obstacle against which the human will and human desires are destined to be broken, in fact is itself perfectly obedient to the divine will as manifested in necessity: “Brute force is not sovereign in this world. It is by nature blind and indeterminate. What is sovereign in this world is determinateness, limit. Eternal Wisdom imprisons this universe in a network, a web of determinations. The universe accepts passively. The brute force of matter, which appears to us sovereign, is nothing else in reality but perfect

81 Weil, Gravity and Grace, 132.
obedience.” Insofar as the created material world represents the utter absence of God, it can be understood in some sense as evil. It is sheer otherness: it is not merely the negation of God’s existence, but rather, God’s contrary, since the only way in which it is able to exist is if God withdraws his own existence. What is contrary to the good is, of course, evil. Yet Weil also claims that its sovereignty in the world is a matter of appearance, and not reality; it is in fact nothing other than pure obedience to the necessary web of relations that governs the world in God’s absence. She explains this seeming contradiction thusly: “There is every degree of distance between the creature and God. A distance where the love of God is impossible. Matter, plants, animals. Here, evil is so complete that it destroys itself: there is no longer any evil: mirror of divine innocence.” Just as Weil acknowledges that there is no real difference between calling everything providential and nothing providential, so also does she observe that, because it is at the level of complete and total otherness from God, there is no real difference between seeing matter as sheer evil, and seeing it as perfectly pure and transparent to God’s love.

Here it is possible to see Weil’s creative appropriation of her Christian Neoplatonic inheritance. As with thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine (and Plotinus, for that matter), for Weil, too, the notion that the brute force of matter could be evil poses a considerable threat to a belief in the sacramental character of the created universe. And yet, to avoid a dualist position according to which the source of evil would be independent of God (who is ultimately the source of good), while still maintaining the dependence of the universe on God or the first principle, Weil maintains that even brute

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83 Weil, Gravity and Grace, 71.
matter in some fashion originates from God, albeit with a certain careful qualification.

Significantly, this qualification turns on the twin notions of obedience and autonomy vis-à-vis the order of the universe. In this way, it must be noted, Weil is very close, both to classic and Christian Neoplatonists, for whom the moral is an extension or even a sub-category of the metaphysical and the physical. According to Weil, the material universe—simultaneously brute force and abstract, diamond-hard relational necessity—cannot actually exercise autonomous free will, and thus maintains a kind of telescopic continuity with the absent God, whom it cannot reject or dismiss in the way an autonomous being can do. Insofar as “God...makes himself necessity,” and this necessity subsists in the material universe as its organizing principle, matter itself cannot serve as the force that ruptures God from God, nor can it be other than pure obedience to God:

The material universe through its intelligible structure having been as it were ‘subsumed’ into an aspect of God himself, it is only in light of the special meaning Weil attributes to ‘creation’ that one can understand how ‘the abdication constituted by the creative act’ is able to rend God from God... Both human beings and matter are between God and God, human beings as screen and matter as mirror; but it is the screen only that is an obstacle in the exchange of love between the Father and the Son through that perfectly transparent mirror that is material creation. Material things, by the presence in them of necessity, are in perfect continuity with God.

Matter, for Weil, lacks the being that autonomous humans possess, albeit illegitimately.

It is autonomy—what Weil sometimes refers to as the human being’s assent to continued existence—that serves as the locus of an opaque and illicit being belonging to humans

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84 For the ancients, the question of fate and free will “formed part of physics rather than of ethics... For us, the postulation of free will might seem to constitute the prerequisite for an ethical theory, but ancient thinkers, whether Platonist, Peripatetic, or Stoic, seem rather to have concentrated on the metaphysical implications of the concepts of fate or providence, and their consequences for the estimation of ‘what is in our power’ (to eph’hēmin), though they certainly did not ignore the moral implications” (John M. Dillon, “An ethic for the late antique sage,” The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus, 329).
85 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 190.
86 Vetö, The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil, 16.
who persist in willing to be. While matter is utterly other than God and therefore occupies simultaneously a position of sheer evil and complete purity, Weil claims that human beings “are at the point where love is just possible… God has created a world which is not the best possible, but which contains the whole range of good and evil. We are at the point where it is as bad as possible; for beyond is the stage where evil becomes innocence.”

The condition of autonomy is for Weil precisely what it means to exist; hence, matter in itself does not truly have existence. Insofar as the human being affirms her autonomy, her independent selfhood, and her existence, she continues to serve as a screen between God and creation, since for Weil, “The ego is only the shadow projected by sin and error which blocks God’s light and which I take for a being.”

The process of abolishing this autonomous selfhood—something that is for Weil “[a]t once ontological requirement and religious commandment”—she names “decreation,” and it amounts to a kind of counter-movement to creation in which the self refuses to continue to exist, while nevertheless persisting in living. Like Plotinus, for whom the generation of matter-evil results from the downward movement of soul “towards herself” and towards “what comes after her,” Weil understands evil and sin—and as we will see, also substantial existence to some extent—as hinging on the self’s movement toward itself and away from the good. This does not mean that Weil holds to a strictly dualist position in which the body, qua matter, is evil; rather, it is the case that the entire human being, as body and soul, possesses substantial existence only illegitimately. This spurious substantial existence

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88 On this point, of course, she is very close to classic Neoplatonism and Christian Neoplatonism alike, both of which classify brute matter as a kind of non-being on account of its distance from the One/the Good (though the precise status and significance of this non-being vary from thinker to thinker, and the manner of understanding and interpreting such a complex concept is a source of debate among scholars).
91 Plotinus, *Ennead* III.9.3.7-12.
existence must, in the end, be relinquished in favor of an authentic being which is not at
all substantial, but rather, purely relational.

It is true that humans, like all material entities such as rocks and trees and
animals, are wholly embedded in the network of intelligible laws constituting necessity
(which is, it must be remembered, co-extensive with the realm of brute force). This
means that, as material entities, humans are required to confront their limitations and the
obstacles posed by brute force and by necessity on a regular basis. Whether this
confrontation takes the form of a clash with materiality itself (in the guise of natural
forces, scarcity of resources, etc.) or of an experience of oppression by the implacable
order of necessity or the exercise of tyrannical human power, Weil starkly insists that
“[i]t would seem that man is born a slave, and that servitude is his natural condition.”

However, the unique capacities of the human will—to discern, discover and decide—
means that a human being is capable (at least in theory) of consenting to the existence of
what is other than herself. In setting aside the self, which is constantly grasping at other
entities to use as instruments for garnering survival at the expense of these other entities,
the human being is able to see through the chaos of brute materiality to the underlying
interconnectedness of the entire cosmos. However, recognition of this network of
relations “through which each thing, being in its place, allows every other thing to
exist,” remains merely formal unless the intelligence and the will are united in, and
animated by love. What results from such a process of unification is something Weil
calls “attention.” As Iris Murdoch explains, for Weil, “Will and reason… are not entirely
separate faculties in the moral agent. Will continually influences belief; for better or

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worse, and is ideally able to influence it through a sustained attention to reality. This is what Simone Weil means when she says that ‘will is obedience not resolution.’”\(^94\) In order to develop the kind of sustained attention to reality that permits the will and the intellect to become united, one must become obedient to reality; that is, one must consent to necessity and to the network of implacable relations and the stubborn material constraints which to the ordinary view seem like obstacles that frustrate the self’s desires and actions. It is this obedience to the reality of the world—an “attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy”\(^95\)—that permits the persuasive power of love for that which is to “[join] us to Good and [join] us to the world through the Good.”\(^96\) Without love—something Weil considers, after Plato, to be a power that operates, not via force, but via persuasion\(^97\)—even the individual who is able to recognize intellectually the formal necessity which informs and underlies brute matter will be unable to activate this “reading” in the realm of practical ethics or the social sphere.\(^98\)

According to Weil, there exists alongside the natural necessity which constitutes the order of the universe, a social necessity, which represents human—and therefore illusory—efforts to bring order out of the chaos of brute force. The social order, which

\(^95\) Ibid., 99.
\(^96\) Ibid., 100.
\(^97\) Weil always remains mindful of Plato’s statement in the *Symposium* that love is poor and needy. Despite this poverty, in a gloss on 196d of the *Symposium*, Weil states, “Ares cannot conquer Love, since force cannot attain to Love. Love conquers Ares... Love never exerts force, carries no arms, and yet...contains in itself all there is of valour which is other than brutality and armed might” (Weil, “The *Symposium* of Plato,” *Intimations of Christianity*, 122).
\(^98\) Murdoch’s Weilian perspective emphasizes the sterility of an intellectually-motivated will that remains unpersuaded by love: “The neo-Kantian existentialist ‘will’ is a principle of pure movement. But how ill this describes what it is like for us to alter. Deliberately falling out of love is not a jump of the will, it is the acquirng of new objects of attention and thus of new energies as a result of refocusing. The metaphor of orientation may indeed also cover moments when recognizable ‘efforts of will’ are made, but explicit efforts of will are only part of the whole situation” (Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 54).
Weil nearly always refers to as the Great Beast after Socrates’ speech in the Republic, is as Weil understands it a counterfeit attempt by human beings to employ their autonomous wills in imposing relationships and ordered structures upon the immediate encounter with the brute force or might encountered in sensible experience. This attempt is always destined for failure, since “In reality, man only submits to force and never actually exercises it, whatever may be the circumstances. The ability to exercise force is an illusion; nobody possesses that ability; force is a mechanism. The devil presides over this illusion.”

Nevertheless, human beings experience this artificial social necessity in much the same way that they experience the relentless structures of natural necessity; if one is on the receiving end of the exercise of power, it is difficult, and sometimes even impossible in the case of some, to discern whether that power comes from the force of gravity or the oppressive use of force by a fellow human being. Most humans, when faced with the overwhelming web of determinations represented by the social order, lack the capacity to do other than submit to it, without, however engaging the intellect and will in a loving and obedient consent to reality. Because of this, Weil observes that

> The collective is the object of all idolatry, this it is which chains us to the earth. In the case of avarice: gold is of the social order. In the case of ambition: power is of the social order. Science and art are full of the social element also. And love? Love is more or less an exception: that is why we can go to God through love, not through avarice or ambition. Yet the social element is not absent from love…

While love not infrequently goes astray insofar as it seeks to control, dominate, or even cannibalize its object, Weil nevertheless sees love as the one thing which (at its best and purest) is capable of resisting the pull of social necessity—a necessity which in fact is closer to brute force than to natural necessity in that it is governed by the law of power’s

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inexorable expansion to its utter limits. Rather than submitting to social necessity when we encounter it, Weil proposes instead a compassionate refusal to participate in the exercise and transmission of power while still loving those who, in exercising it over others, wittingly or unwittingly proclaim their conformity with the social order, and hence also with the realm of brute force. As she explains, those “who disregard the true good disobey God in the sense that they don’t obey him as a thinking creature ought to do, with the consent of the mind. But their bodies and souls are entirely subject to the laws of the mechanisms that rule in sovereign fashion over physical and psychical matter… They are perfectly obedient insofar as they are matter… That is why the evil they cause us should be accepted in the same spirit as the evil which inert matter causes us.”¹⁰¹ In exercising power within the social order, such people may do us injury. However, the mere fact of their use of force demonstrates that they are in some fashion no more than base materiality, and as such, they are to be loved in the same way that the material universe is to be loved. Indeed, particularly in her later work, Weil holds that human institutions and collectivities possess at least the potential to serve as limited goods—as metaxu—so long as their contingency and their status as mere conventions are recognized. She writes,

Conventions have a certain reality, but of a secondary and artificial order… In all human institutions the images of a supernatural order are to be found, and this is why Plato calls them puppets, likenesses of real beings. But one only recognizes this resemblance in so far as one considers them as institutions when one has turned from the shadows, that is to say, from the prestige.¹⁰²

The problem, however, is that most people are unable to turn away from the shadowy lure of social prestige and power, the desire for which characterizes most members of any

collectivity. What Weil finds particularly horrifying about this is the fact that, although social necessity shares certain traits with necessity considered as the order of the world, the mechanism by which social necessity operates is actually the inverse of that by which natural necessity works. Social necessity is every bit as relentless and inexorable as natural necessity, yet it has the added ghastliness of being a kind of unreality, and of serving as the monstrous force by which the few subjugate the many. As Weil observes, “Social prestige…is pure illusion, is a thing which has no existence. And yet power is ninety per cent prestige, and power dominates all in this world.” Yet against and in the very midst of power and its endless iterations, expansions, and abuses, claims Weil, there exists within the cosmos the counter-mimetic possibility of attention: the persuasive, dynamic union of intellect and will in loving and ethical action. In order to understand precisely how love can redeem human autonomy, as well as the precise role love plays in Weil’s cosmology in governing and limiting brute force, it will be necessary to turn now to an examination of chora, since it is partly through this concept—once more an inheritance from Plato—that Weil develops her relational and non-substantial cosmology and her incarnational, mediation-based understanding of the relationship between necessity and the good.

IV. Chora, Self-Gift, and the Mediated World

Up to this point, we have been discussing the telescoping and overlapping relationship between the brute, unintelligible forces of the material world and the implacable but intelligible order of necessity. This structure is the result of a kenotic

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103 Ibid., 135.
divine creation in which God withdraws in order to permit the existence of the universe. In God’s place it is necessity which governs the world and all that is in it. Yet more must be said about the status of the universe’s existence: how “real” is this existence if, as Weil claims, its perdurance is in some fashion illegitimate, and how, precisely, does Weil understand the existence of human beings to differ from the bare existence of the material world, particularly since she seems to suggest that human autonomy represents a form of unreal substantiality?

Weil writes, “That which is above is like that which is below… The presentation of several forms in the same object lifts the spectator (the reader) above form. By that means one obtains the without-form which is above form; for there is always the danger of falling below form. That which is below is like that which is above—in a reverse sense. Each state is a μεταζώ…”105 In the poetic (and even occasionally cryptic) style which typifies her Notebooks, Weil suggests that there is a formlessness which lies both above the world and below it, and that human beings—who exist between the above and below—possess the capacity to shift up and down by making use of the multiplex structure of objects in the world. In this, of course, Weil’s schematisation of the levels of being aligns closely with that of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists, who also see life “assembl[ing] itself in the between… that it spans by participating in becoming and transcending being.”106 The danger of error and evil arises for Weil when the human being falls below form instead of employing the available μεταζώ to move upward toward a higher “reading.” This “fall” invariably involves a movement in the direction of

105 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 63-64. Though she does not identify it here, the phrase “that which is below is like that which is above” is borrowed from Hermes Trismegistus, whom she names as its author elsewhere in the Notebooks.
materiality and the self’s cannibalizing desires, without, however, going far enough toward matter to relinquish all autonomy and self-will (thereby imitating matter more purely and thoroughly). For Weil as for Plotinus, “It is not exclusively matter or the material world that introduces evil into the metaphysical structure, but, correlatively, the fact that the incorporation of the soul into the composite submits it to the wrenching pull of desire and opens up the possibility of failure and defeat.”¹⁰⁷ Recall that, according to Weil, it is precisely because human beings, as hybrid entities, lie at the intersection of matter and freedom that they, unlike the natural world, possess the susceptibility to desire and the capacity to succumb to the lure of the imagination. Recall, too, that Weil follows a Neoplatonist line of thinking when she insists that sensible matter is so far removed from the good that it is pure evil, and thus can be considered a kind of non-being.¹⁰⁸ Yet Weil—again, in Neoplatonic fashion—distinguishes between (on the one hand) concrete instantiations of matter in the world, which are associated with evil and are a kind of non-being, but which nonetheless derive from the creative and kenotic action of God, and (on the other hand) the absolute non-being which corresponds to the “without form” that lies “below form.”¹⁰⁹ The former, for both Weil and Plotinus, possesses some kind of real, if shadowy, existence, while the same cannot be said of the latter. According to Weil, concrete objects in the world, because they are determinate and limited by form—informed by number, as she would claim, following a Pythagorean insight—ultimately

¹⁰⁷ Georges Leroux, “Human Freedom in the Thought of Plotinus,” in The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus, 297. For Weil, this truly is only a possibility of failure and defeat, since her Christianized Neoplatonism allows for a sacramental understanding of materiality through which there exists the possibility of grace and decreation. Thus, materiality for Weil represents both obstacle and sacramental means.

¹⁰⁸ As Plotinus explains, “we exist more” the nearer we are to the Good, and we exist less by “being far from him.” Ennead VI.9.9.7-13.

¹⁰⁹ Compare to Plotinus: “The non-being that is evil, and that will be identified with matter as [Ennead I] progresses, is not ‘absolute non-being’ (to pantelós mé on)…” Denis O’Brien, “Plotinus on Matter and Evil,” The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus, 174.
can be known. In accordance with Neoplatonism, Weil holds that it is not their materiality which is knowable, since matter *qua* matter remains unintelligible and unreal. Nevertheless, insofar as concrete objects in the world possess an “unperceived, yet understood form which is…the body of the object for us,”¹¹⁰ they can be known, and it is in this way that they are simultaneously real non-being.

However, where Weil departs from a Neoplatonist reading of the material world is in her interpretation of the non-being of sensible matter as a manifestation of its status as non-substantial, relational existence. That is, when it comes to the physical materiality of the cosmos, for “non-being,” Weil reads non-substantial or purely relational:

[W]here the objects of the senses are concerned, it becomes clear, as soon as one analyses the perception of them in a fairly strict manner, that what one calls objects are simply groups of relationships which impose themselves upon the mind by the intervention of the senses. It is the same with sentiments, ideas, and the whole psychological content of the human consciousness.¹¹¹

In one way, this is not, perhaps, as far removed from a certain reading of Plotinus in which he can be seen as refusing “to see determinate beings as self-enclosed units” and instead attempting “to work out the structure of such beings in terms of their own natures…[and] the world of interrelations they manifest.”¹¹² While Weil, too, focuses on determinate beings in their interrelation with other entities and with the structures of necessity, she nevertheless has a more radical understanding of the non-being of material creatures and especially of humans, for whom substantial existence is a feature of the relational and partly illusory world of being and becoming which lies between the beyond-being above and the beyond-being below.¹¹³

¹¹³ The particulars of Weil’s relational anthropology will be discussed at greater length in Chs. 2 and 3.
Significantly, she does not actually reduce the objects of the senses to mere mental perceptions within human consciousness; rather, she identifies the human tendency—governed as it is by an egoist desire to see everyone and everything else in terms of the self—to interpret objects as “groups of relationships” within the consciousness, all of which are conjoined by means of being united in and through the hub of the autonomous self. This reductive, self-centered interpretation correctly identifies the relational (rather than substantial) structure of all that exists in the universe; that is, the grasping ego strives to convert the energy of others into ever-greater being and power for itself. Through its desires and attachments, the self dissolves all other objects into relational energy which it consumes in order to supplement and subtend its existence (which it falsely believes is substantial, wholly free, and perduring). Thus, it is in fact the case that all entities exist within a sublunary network of infinitely convertible relations, from which energy cannot be liberated—only consumed and repurposed. This network operates whether or not an individual is aware of it, and whether or not such a network is perceived under the guise of brute force or ordered necessity. Even when the falsely autonomous ego believes itself to be exercising freedom and power over the groups of objects outside itself, it nevertheless obeys the relational nexus of necessity. As Weil explains,

Obedience: there are two kinds. We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationship between things. In the first case, we do what we are urged to by the imagination which fills up voids. We can affix thereto, and often with a show of truth, a variety of labels, including righteousness and God. If we suspend the filling up activity of the imagination and fix our attention on the relationship between things, a necessity becomes apparent which we cannot help obeying. Until then we have not the notion of necessity, nor have we the sense of obedience.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{114} Weil, \textit{Notebooks}, vol. 1, 155.
According to Weil, then, human beings are always obedient to necessity, even before they realize this to be the case. However, initially, their obedience to what she calls gravity arises from the fact that, as material entities who refuse to exercise attention, they are simply matter, as destructive and yet as purposeless as roof tiles blown about in the wind. It is in this regard that they can be categorized as non-being, just like other concrete instantiations of matter in the world such as stones or dead leaves. Through their refusal to attend to the relational structures of the universe, and through their insistence upon imaginatively and falsely exercising their spurious autonomy, they turn inward toward themselves and toward the non-being below. Only when humans begin to attend to the relations that make up the becoming and the “between” of the cosmos can they become genuinely obedient, and through decreation, move toward the non-being that is above. When they have undergone the process of decreation, they will once more become like unto material objects, but of a higher order, and capable of transmitting and holographically representing (in almost sacramental fashion) divine love in creation.

Weil’s depiction of the world of the “between” draws partly upon a particular reading of the *Timaeus*, in which Plato introduces the notion of chora as “a third kind”\(^\text{115}\) that is “hardly real.”\(^\text{116}\) That is, “chora and the Good [are] both beyond being and Being,”\(^\text{117}\) and yet this “beyond” in each case designates a different “place.” Neither can be said to exist in any thick sense of the term, and yet both possess a kind of causality without which the in-between world of being and becoming cannot exist. In attempting to understand precisely how Weil conceives of these diverging principles of causality, it


\(^{116}\) Plato, *Timaeus*, 49a, 1176; 52b, 1179.

\(^{117}\) Bigger, *Between Chora and the Good*, 70.
is essential to examine both her treatment of what she sees as five levels of mediation stretching from the divine to chora, and her gloss on Plato’s *Timaeus* in which she develops her ideas of Christ as logos and World Soul, and of *chora* as absolutely receptive and wholly self-giving.\(^{118}\)

Emmanuel Gabellieri, following Eric Springsted and drawing on Weil’s essay “The Pythagorean Doctrine,” lists Weil’s five levels of mediation as “(1) the Trinity, (2) the relation between God and creation, (3) friendship between God and [individual] humans, (4) friendship between humans, [and] (5) ‘number,’ which gives its own internal order (*logos*) to material necessity itself.”\(^{119}\) These five levels involve pairs of contraries which are mediated into a harmonic unity. As each pair of contraries is mediated, the resulting harmonic unity in turn becomes the first term in a new set of contraries existing below it. In developing her theory of mediation, Weil reads Plato’s statement in the *Timaeus* that perfect unity between two terms can arise only if there is a third term “between them, in the middle, a bond which brings them into union”\(^{120}\) in light of the famous Timaean cosmology featuring the Demiurge, the Model, and the World Soul. By connecting her reading of the *Timaeus* to passages from John’s Gospel intimating the unity of Jesus with the Father, to Philolaus’ phrase concerning “the common thought of separate thinkers,” and to the formula of Diogenes Laertius that “Friendship is an equality made of harmony,” Weil is able to characterize the Trinity as “the friendship above all in

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\(^{118}\) For much of this treatment of Weil’s five levels of mediation I am indebted to both Eric Springsted (*Christus Mediator*, 169ff.) and Emmanuel Gabellieri (“Reconstructing Platonism,” *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 140ff.). However, my reading of Weil on chora represents something of a departure. For access to Weil’s unpublished copy of the *Timaeus* with her marginalia and comments in the Bib. Nat., I am indebted to Florence de Lussy.

\(^{119}\) Gabellieri, “Reconstructing Platonism,” *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 140. Springsted expresses it more simply as a demonstration by Weil of “harmony and mediation in regard to God, God and Creation, God and man, man and man, and finally, in an extended sense, to the relations of created matter” (*Christus Mediator*, 169).

\(^{120}\) Plato, *Timaeus*, 31c.
excellence” and the “first pair of contraries”\textsuperscript{121} which consist of unity and plurality conjoined through harmony.

This is the case because God must be simultaneously singular and plural if we are to understand God as a perfect, thinking being whose object of thought and whose thought itself are also perfect, thinking beings: “His name is ‘I am.’ That is His name as subject, it is also his name as object, it is also his name as contact with the subject and object.”\textsuperscript{122} Weil connects this to the Pythagorean notion that the “first pair of contraries is one and two, unity and plurality,”\textsuperscript{123} and states that it is the harmonic union of this pair of contraries which constitutes the Trinity. She adds, “Plato doubtless had also the Trinity in mind as the first pair of contraries when in the \textit{Timaeus} he named the terms of the first pair of contraries the Same and the Other.”\textsuperscript{124} From here, Weil moves on to the second pair of oppositional entities: the contrariety between God and creation, otherwise understood as “that which limits and that which is limitless.”\textsuperscript{125} Weil explores this second set of contraries using this notion of the limiter and the limitless from the \textit{Philebus} as her guide; this text provides her with a kind of map of mediation which she employs to locate the harmonic unities and interrelated mediations of contraries throughout the cosmos. This map serves as a

\begin{flushright}
\text{general doctrine of mediation...[that is] applicable to any ontological level through the second term of opposition of any mediated relationship becoming the intermediary term for a new relationship between the contraries of the old mediated relationship regarded as one thing and some new opposition to it. Just}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 167. Springsted makes explicit the Trinitarian dimensions of Weil’s point: “God is essentially act and He is essentially one. Because acting, however, requires more than one term, God’s eternal and infinite action...is therefore trinitarian” (Springsted, \textit{Christus Mediator}, 171). Weil herself cites Augustine’s conception of the Trinity as two relationships of “equality and connection” as a support for her own reflection.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
as the primal set of contraries of one and many are mediated in the Godhead, and the many becomes the mediating term for a second set of contraries and thus itself regarded as a unit, so too can it be further divided.\textsuperscript{126}

Following this “doctrine of mediation,” Weil moves from the mediation of unity and plurality within the Trinity to the mediation of God and creation, or limit and the limitless void.

It is at this point that her commentary on the creation myth of the \textit{Timaeus} comes into play, since she identifies the demiurge, the model, and the world soul as the first, third, and second persons of the Trinity respectively. Developing her cosmology in a panentheistic direction, Weil calls Plato’s Soul of the World “the unique Son of God,” citing Plato’s use of the word “‘monogenes’ like St. John.”\textsuperscript{127} She writes, “The visible world is his body. That does not imply pantheism; he is not in the visible world just as our soul is not in our body... The Soul of the World is infinitely more vast than matter, contains matter and envelopes it from all parts (34b)... The Soul of the World...contains in itself the substance of God united to the principle of matter.”\textsuperscript{128} It is precisely this intersection between God and matter which Weil sees as representing the mediating function of Christ as the \textit{logos}—the orderer and the order itself of the world. Yet the manner in which Christ becomes united to matter is of particular importance for Weil, since she admits that it is difficult to understand just how such a mediating unity between the perfect principle of limitation and utterly limitless materiality could occur. Indeed, she observes that, in order for this harmonic unity to be effected, “not only the principle

\textsuperscript{126} Springsted, \textit{Christus Mediator}, 173.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid. As Inese Radzins claims, “[C]hora is fundamentally outside the process of signification, defying any linguistic or conceptual grounding. Instead of assuming a subject that posits the world or represents it to itself as an object, Weil reinscribes the world within an indeterminate or non-representational space” (“Choric Inspiration: Simone Weil’s Apophatic Cosmology,” paper presented at Colloquy XXVI of the American Weil Society, Providence, R.I., 2006).
of limitation but also the inert matter and the union between the two, must be divine Persons, just as the bond which links them must be a Person. But inert matter does not think, it cannot be a person.”

This difficulty is resolved, according to Weil, and the harmonic unity is brought into being, by Christ’s kenosis—begun in creation when he enters into time and space as necessity, continued in the incarnation when he accepts flesh and becomes a slave, and culminating in the crucifixion “when the circumstances…have been brutal to the point of making a thing of that person. This is a slave dying, a miserable bit of flesh nailed upon a cross.”

Yet because this piece of inert matter is also the Soul of the World and the second person of the Trinity, he is able to persist in loving, which permits him to exist as matter and as a person. In this manner, he has become like the logos alogos of the Pythagoreans, since through him the absolute opposition between God and material creation has been mediated. For Weil this is a “harmony in which is found the maximum distance and the maximum unity between the contraries.”

Once again, Weil moves from the mediation of this second set of contraries to the third set of contraries, which consists of God in the form of the World Soul (the order of world or the one who is “crucified on time and space”) and the individual human being. In her commentary on the Timaeus, Weil understands the order of the world—necessity—as a mark of its perfect obedience to the World Soul or logos; indeed, at times she seems to identify the order of the world as an instantiation of the World Soul. If the opposition between the human individual and the order of the world (experienced by the

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130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 This phrase shows up in several of Weil’s marginal comments in her copy of the Timaeus (e.g. p. 148 and 165).
individual principally as an encounter with affliction and limitation)\textsuperscript{133} is to be mediated, this mediation must take the form of a graced imitation by the human being of the physical world’s obedience to the World Soul or logos. “Thus the Word is a model for man to imitate. Not in this case the Word incarnate in a human being, but the Word as the orderer of the world, so far as incarnate in the universe as a whole.”\textsuperscript{134} This entails a refusal to exist as a substantial and autonomous entity and an agent exercising power over others, just as God in creation and Christ in the incarnation and passion enacted such refusals. This refusal on the part of the human being involves a decreative transformation of spurious existence into the relations of energy that constitute the structure of the cosmos. Then, like God who “is essentially mediation,”\textsuperscript{135} the individual, too, ceases to be the term of relation, and instead becomes relation itself. Indeed, this imitation of the obedience of the World Soul and the material universe means that the human being has become “like God, but God crucified. Like God almighty in so far as he has bound himself by necessity.”\textsuperscript{136} It is only through this refusal to exercise power that Weil thinks humans are able to make manifest the fourth level of the mediation of contraries, namely, that between one human being and another. Since this form of mediation will be taken up at length in the third chapter, we’ll move directly to Weil’s fifth form of harmonic mediation, which consists of the opposition between number and materiality.

This fifth level of mediation differs from the second level between God and creation despite being related to it, since unlike the latter, it is not “concerned with

\textsuperscript{133} As Springsted explains, “[A]ffliction poses [a threat] to the human ability to imitate consistently the creator’s own act, for affliction makes us turn to falsehood in order to save our lives. Man is an intelligent creature and he can therefore escape into illusion unlike the vast majority of creatures who obey their limits almost mechanically” (Springsted, \textit{Christus Mediator}, 177).

\textsuperscript{134} Weil, “Divine Love in Creation,” \textit{Intimations of Christianity}, 96.


\textsuperscript{136} Weil, \textit{Notebooks}, vol. 1, 213.
persons,” but rather, with the mediating relations between material things or creatures. While it is true that Weil understands the human being as spiritual and material, she claims nevertheless that the spiritual portion of every individual is almost infinitely small; it is materiality which constitutes the largest part of the human being. Weil begins her discussion of this fifth form of mediation with an exposition of Philolaus’ statement that “number, fitting all things into the soul through sense perception, renders them comprehensible and mutually in accord, and gives them a body and separates by force each relationship of unlimited and limiting things.” What can it mean, she asks, to say that number gives things a body? To understand this cryptic statement, Weil invokes the image of the gnomon of a sundial—a gloss on Philolaus’ use of the word gnomon—and uses it to develop a conception of mathematical function in relation to the necessity of the world. The sundial’s gnomon “remains immobile while its shadow turns and changes in length. The variableness of the shadow is determined by the immobility of the stem on account of the movement of the turning sun.” It is precisely this interaction between something invariant and groups of variations that characterizes the contact of the human mind with necessity and forces the human being to encounter reality in distinction from illusion, fantasy, or imagination. “Necessity always appears to us as an ensemble of laws of variation, determined by fixed relationships and invariants. Reality for the human

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137 Weil, “The Pythagorean Doctrine,” Intimations of Christianity, 177. As Springsted explains, with regard to the second form of mediation, “her concern was with the relation of God to…creation… [T]his relationship was discovered to be a harmony and friendship because of the Son’s role as the Soul of the World… Here, however, she is not so much concerned with that relationship as she is with the relation of the natural created being, man, to other created things and finally his relationship to the whole insofar as it is the natural order of Necessity and he is a being who exists within it” (Christus Mediator, 181).
138 Weil, “The Pythagorean Doctrine,” Intimations of Christianity, 153. The translation from the Greek is hers; the larger fragment is found in Diels 11, B 139-160.
mind is contact with necessity.” However, because reality is tangible and experiential while necessity is purely intelligible, there appears to be a contradiction in such a statement. The way past this contradiction can be found through an understanding that the intelligibility of necessity as reality “is not the entire story, as if the physical universe were only a Berkleian system of ideas.” Necessity is itself conditional, and as such, it requires a support in order to ground and fix it.

Without a basis, [necessity] is but abstraction; upon a basis, it constitutes the reality of creation itself. Of that basis we cannot have the least conception. However the Greeks had a word (ἀπειρόν), which means at once unlimited and indeterminate. This is what Plato calls the receptacle, the matrix, the hallmark, the essence which is the mother of all things and at the same time always intact, always virginal.

If necessity is limit or number (and hence intelligible), then what it rests on—chora or the apeiron—is without limit and hence utterly unknowable. Despite its unknowability, chora is nevertheless the place out of which the universe comes into being and the space which, while manifesting a kind of impassibility, provides the basis and ground for all that changes and becomes, and for the unchanging structures of necessity which govern change and becoming.

In a number of passages across her work, Weil makes mention of Plato’s matrix of generation from the Timaeus, and in nearly all such passages, she reinforces the

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140 Ibid. Weil also invokes the image of Lagneau’s cube. We can never see the cube as it is—our perspectival limitations preclude such a complete vision—and yet “we convince ourselves of the reality of [the cube] by going around it, an operation successively producing varied appearances which are determined by the immobility of a form which is different from all appearances, exterior to them and transcending them. By this operation we know that the object is a thing and not an apparition, that it has a body” (“The Pythagorean Doctrine,” Intimations of Christianity, 178). As Michel Narcy points out, Lagneau represents for Weil “a mode of thought that rejects the separation of the intelligible from the perceivable, and for which, quite the opposite, the inherence of the intelligible in the perceivable is at once the lesson taken from and the key to perception” (“The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil’s Platonism,” The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil, 29). Of course, this important point serves to demonstrate further Weil’s Neoplatonic tendencies, since the structures of mediation in the cosmos and the partial intelligibility of matter on account of these structures show her affinity with Neoplatonic thought.

141 Springsted, Christus Mediator, 184.

feminine nomenclature that Plato employs, however reticently. (Indeed, Weil is considerably less reticent than Plato or Plato’s latter-day commentators in utilizing such terminology). Frequently, she links Plato’s chora to the Virgin and the Great Mother, citing their fecundity which persists without alteration or modification, despite hosting the interplay of forces and oppositions that characterize coming-to-be: “The Virgin is the Great Mother (the Earth). She was left intact both by the conception and even by the childbirth, because she was, as Mary, a young Jewish woman, and incarnation of the Mother—the Matrix, the Nurse, the Receiver-of-impressions as described in the Timaeus—whom all Becoming, all act of generation leaves intact.”143 It is partly on account of Mary’s fiat—her quite literally patient openness and obedience to the divine—that Weil sees a likeness between the Virgin and chora.144 The materiality of creation—about which we cannot know anything except via necessity—can be considered perfectly pure in its absolute obedience to the order of the world; Weil extends this to a discussion of Mary, stating that the “Virgin is the creation, under the aspect of purity.”145 Just as we are enjoined to imitate matter’s perfect obedience to necessity or logos, so also are we told to imitate chora or the Virgin: “Obeying the World Soul not only implies obedience to necessity but also entails, on a deeper level, obedience to ‘the inertness of matter.’ This is the condition for receiving all form…”146

As we have seen, Weil considers the creation of the universe to be the result of a mediation between God and matter, the principle of limitation and that which is without

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143 Weil, Notebook, vol. 2, 571.
144 Weil also makes this connection etymologically: “Water is the best image of [the ἄπειρον] because it has neither form nor colour even though it be visible and tangible. On this subject it is impossible not to notice that the words matter, mother, sea (mer), Marie resemble each other to the point of being almost identical” (Weil, “The Pythagorean Doctrine,” Intimations of Christianity, 179).
limit (the *apeiron*). Yet significantly for Weil, creation is not brought about through force, power, or imposition. Rather, it is “an act of love, and it is something which is going on perpetually.”\(^{147}\) In choosing to withdraw out of love for that which is not God, God “refrained from ‘commanding wherever he had the power’… This movement is love.”\(^{148}\) For Weil, then, it is plain that “Creation is renunciation by love.”\(^{149}\) By means of this renunciation, God permits mathematical necessity to govern the brute force of matter and imbue the universe with order, however harsh and implacable. Yet even the relentless impersonality of necessity is a mark of God’s love rather than an exhibition of God’s power: “That this mathematical necessity should be the substance of the world—that is the sign of our Father, the witness that necessity was conquered from the beginning by a wise persuasion.”\(^{150}\) The phrase “wise persuasion” of course calls to mind the *Timaeus*, which Weil elsewhere explicitly notes in a recapitulation of her conception of creation:

> But the thought which really enraptured the ancients was this: what makes the blind forces of matter obedient is not another, stronger force; it is love. They believed that matter was obedient to eternal Wisdom by virtue of the love which causes it to consent to this obedience. Plato, in his *Timaeus*, says that divine Providence dominates necessity by exercising a wise form of persuasion over it.\(^{151}\)

This double renunciation—on the part of God and chora in the process of creation—lies at the heart of Weil’s declaration that humans ought to imitate the self-renunciation of God on the one hand, and the obedience of materiality (represented by the natural world, to be sure, but *a fortiori* by chora) on the other. The common element in both of these forms of imitation to which humans are called is attention, or a love-inflected intellectual

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148 Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 81. Her citation is from Thucydides.  
150 Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 80.  
orientation. Since the kenotic self-gift of God has been addressed, we must turn now to a closer examination of choric self-gift.

According to Weil, the kind of obedience manifested by chora is a categorical and unqualified openness to the becoming of the universe. This openness, which we are to imitate, is inherently risky to the self’s enclosed identity, since it requires a porousness that defies boundaries and offers itself up to and for others. The consent of chora to be a space in which all of the creation comes to be is, for Weil, a model of what our own consent should be vis-à-vis the created world. Yet this consent leads to decreation, which is a kind of dying of the self and a recognition of the independent being of others whom we cannot consume or instrumentalize. Thus, Weil’s reading of Plato’s chora is not far from that of French philosopher Hélène Cixous, who writes of chora that,

As for passivity, in excess, it is partly bound up with death… Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not…

That is, chora, as the empty space in which creation takes place, risks death and annihilation in her movement to permit the existence of what she is not. This permission on the part of chora simultaneously precedes and exceeds the discursive, binaristic structures/strictures that allow definitions to be formed, determinations to be made, and concrete objects to come into being. At the same time, chora makes possible these very formulations—indeed, chora makes possible everything that is. It is this excessive and disruptive character, along with chora’s openness and self-offering that appeal to Weil, since she understands chora’s “act of begetting” as part of the “divine creation… an act

of generosity and not of desire.” It is precisely this generosity humans must imitate in their own consent to the existence of others, since desire generally serves the self’s interests and leads to the instrumentalization of others, while the generosity of self-gift—particularly to those who are afflicted—imitates choric begetting: “The man who sees someone in affliction and projects into him his own being brings to birth in him through love, at least for a moment, an existence apart from his affliction.” This gift of existence at the price of one’s own autonomous existence is precisely the gift offered by chora in the begetting of the universe.

Significantly for Weil, chora’s status as unlimited renders it a form of non-being; since it is out of (and within) this choric non-being that the whole of the material universe comes into existence, it is the case that the universe, too, possesses something of the status of non-being. To be sure, insofar as the brute matter of the universe is governed by love’s wise persuasion in and through the structures of necessity, the universe can be said to have being, and to be intelligible. Yet the universe also has a share in chora, since, as the empty space in which creation comes to be, Plato’s chora is for Weil the mother of all material things in the universe, and of the universe as a whole. This means that chora, which gives (a) place to metaphysics and to its structures, and so in some sense can be considered as having a part in the intelligible order of metaphysics, nonetheless cannot be contained within metaphysics. Jacques Derrida echoes Plato in observing that chora is both “alien to the order of the ‘paradigm’…[a]nd yet…it ‘participates’ in the intelligible in a very troublesome…way.” Chora belongs neither to the intelligible order nor to the

wholly unintelligible realm of non-being or chaos, and yet it is also—somehow—a part of both. This capacity to disrupt a traditional metaphysics of presence plays a part in Weil’s desire to make chora a model for humans to imitate. The disturbance of traditional categories of essence and accident, and of the subject-object distinction which together have permitted the technophilic and dehumanizing advance of modern science and modern capitalism is for Weil of the utmost importance:

One has only to reflect that every scientific study of natural phenomena, however abstract, is so conducted as to lead in the end to a collection of technical prescriptions or recipes, whereas a sage, a great artist, or a saint never possesses a recipe, even for his own use, and still less for other people, although each of them possesses a method for giving existence to the good which is the object of his aspiration.¹⁵⁶

The sage, the artist, and the saint can be said to imitate choric self-gift in their refusal of binaristic distinctions between self and other, subject and object, and in their desire to beget the good and bring it into being in the universe. Chora, suggests Derrida, “makes possible, opens, hollows or infinitizes the other;”¹⁵⁷ in similar fashion, the individual who imitates chora rejects the impulse to constrain, objectify, or reduce to a “recipe” other entities in the universe.

Although chora’s act of giving place—a passive letting be of what exists—must not be thought of as an intentional generosity or a telos-driven donation in the same way that the Father’s kenosis can be thought, it is nevertheless a kind of gift sans largesse. “To let passage to the other, to the totally other, is hospitality.”¹⁵⁸ In a strange way, chora, remaining always beyond and beneath our capacity to know and understand her, nonetheless “is not the negative limit of a knowledge. This non-knowledge is the

element of...hospitality for the transcendence of the stranger, the infinite distance of the other.”

According to Weil, the consent to love another and to offer hospitality and the gift of existence to someone else (who is at an infinite distance from the self, and whose separate existence can be nothing other than an obstacle to or effacement of the self), is the “identity of human beings across all the apparent distances placed between them by the hazards of fortune.” Where Weil’s reading of chora in fact draws closer to that of feminist philosophers like Cixous and Kristeva, and departs from that of Derrida, is in Weil’s insistence that this choric hospitality and self-gift is best represented by the feminine acts of bearing and birthing.

As Plato writes in the *Timaeus*, “For the present we have only to conceive of three natures: first, that which is in process of generation; secondly, that in which the generation takes place; and thirdly, that of which the thing generated is a resemblance naturally produced. And we may liken the receiving principle to a mother, and the source or spring to a father, and the intermediate nature to a child.” Weil follows Plato closely on this point, reiterating in her own commentary on the *Timaeus* that “one ought to compare that which receives to the mother, the origin to the father, and the nature which is between the two to the son.”

While this appears on initial reading to render chora as one part—the feminine part—of a primordial couple, who together are responsible for the generation of the cosmos, Derrida suggests that such an interpretation might be too easy, and that, ultimately, chora cannot be thought of in terms of a

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162 Weil’s copy of the *Timaeus*, 169-170. Translation mine.
According to Derrida, “[Khôra] does not couple with the father, in other words, with the paradigmatic model. She is a third gender/genus; she does not belong to an oppositional couple, for example, to that which the intelligible paradigm forms with the sensible becoming and which looks rather like a father/son couple.”

Derrida here points to the fact that, in Plato’s schematisation, although receptacle/chora/mother appears to be paired with intelligible/paradigm/father to produce sensible-order/son, in reality it is intelligibility and sensibility which form the true dialectical pair. “The ‘mother’ is supposedly apart… Khôra marks a place apart, the spacing which keeps a dissymmetrical relation to all that which, ‘in herself,’ beside or in addition to herself, seems to make a couple with her.”

Although she engenders the cosmos and all that is in it—including philosophical discourse—she cannot properly be called “mother,” for her act of engendering amounts to a giving (up) place, through which she effaces herself. One might even say that she has always already been displaced from her proper place by that which takes (her) place; she is always already cancelled out and uncoupled, present only by means of a lingering absence. Cixous has highlighted this curious effacement of the mother—an effacement which never can be carried out fully and completely, for that would be the undoing of all that is, but which nonetheless is carried out by and through philosophy to the greatest extent possible. Her analysis is worth citing at some length:

[A]s soon as the question of ontology raises its head, as soon as one asks oneself “what is it?,” as soon as there is intended meaning. Intention: desire, authority—examine them and you are led right back…to the father. It is even possible not to notice that there is no place whatsoever for woman in the calculations. Ultimately the world of “being” can function while precluding the mother. No

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163 Chora, as triton genos, “is a unique individual. She does not belong to the ‘race of women’ (genos gynaikôn)” (Derrida, “Khôra,” On the Name, 124).
164 Ibid.
165 Ibid.
need for a mother, as long as there is some motherliness: and it is the father, then, who acts the part, who is the mother. Either woman is passive or she does not exist. What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought. Which certainly means that she is not thought, that she does not enter into the oppositions, that she does not make a couple with the father (who makes a couple with the son)… She does not exist, she can not-be; but there has to be something of her. He keeps, then, of the woman on whom he is no longer dependent, only this space, always virginal, as matter to be subjected to the desire he wishes to impart.166

This portrayal corresponds plainly and almost perfectly to both Plato’s and Derrida’s description of chora. Like Derrida, Cixous notes the father’s displacement of the mother in favor of the son, and the concomitant—arguably even consequent—unthinkability and unnameability of the mother. For Derrida, this unnameability means, ultimately, that the feminine names assigned to chora are inadequate—too inadequate to use, perhaps—and that philosophy “speaks only of the father and the son, as if the father engendered it all on his own.”167 Derrida appears content to leave it at that, to leave chora to her place (which has been given [up] by her and taken [up] by the other), and to deny that she ever was truly a she. Certainly he denies that she is now a she, even if the “proper—but necessarily inadequate—figures”168 used to describe her are feminine in character.

For Cixous and Weil, however, the primordial femaleness of this pre-originary “mother” cannot be undone merely by naming it a triton genos, a neutered non-thing that is somehow neither masculine nor feminine and yet somehow also both masculine and feminine. Both Cixous and Weil insist upon the feminine names for chora as approximating closely the actual operation of open consent to all that exists. Cixous deplores the concept “neuter” as a kind of “fantasy of a complete being.”169 This fantasy permits the father and son to efface the mother, to take the place that she gives, and from

167 Derrida, “Khôra,” On the Name, 126.
168 Ibid.
169 Cixous, “A Newly Born Woman,” The Hélène Cixous Reader, 41.
within this place to negate her “existence” and instead assert that the father—a supposedly complete being like Ovid’s Hermaphrodite—“engendered it all on his own.” According to Cixous, the feminine “figures of speech” used by Plato and by all those in the tradition of Western philosophy, up to and including Derrida, actually say something about who chora is and what chora does, and for that reason, these figures allow us to speak about chora, even if only in limited fashion. They are more than mere tropes or convenient names which nevertheless do not touch upon something authentic in or about chora. Likewise, Weil repeatedly refers to Plato’s chora as the Virgin Mary or the great mother, even while acknowledging chora’s resistance to forms and language. This resistance does not, for Weil, preclude the meaningful usage of feminine language to speak of chora: “The receptacle (Plato) is outside of forms; image of the transcendent. Idea of the receptacle. Γη—the great Mother—it is the vast expanse.”

According to Cixous, chora retains her feminine character and identity even in the midst of self-effacement, in the midst of her passive act of giving up her/a place to the world of existents—the binaristic male world of the sensible and intelligible. It is precisely this process of effacement and place-giving that renders chora unnameable (that is, outside of language) and seems to suggest (to Plato and Derrida) that she is not feminine after all (or perhaps before all), but rather a third gender, a *triton genos*. Only in this capacity, says Derrida, can chora perform the function of simultaneously giving place to and disturbing or disrupting presence that “she” must perform. But it is precisely in this hospitable capacity, insist Cixous and Weil alike, that chora is authentically feminine. Emphasizing the Platonic appellation of *triton genos* provides Derrida with a way in which to avoid any conception of chora as a kind of feminine ultimate, which

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undergirds or underlies or grounds everything that is. Such a foundational principle, according to Derrida, would not be capable of the double movement of chora (giving place to and disrupting), but merely would serve as yet another in a long line of totalizing bases of origin or unmoved/unmoving points of reference. The only difference would be that, with chora, this foundational principle would be feminine rather than masculine, but this difference alone is not enough to guarantee that chora would not prove to be just as totalizing as any other pre-originary principle that has held sway in the history of ontotheology.

For Cixous, however, this difference is in itself of capital importance. In Cixous’ understanding, there is indeed a feminine preorigin, but not in the sense that Derrida fears and wishes to deconstruct. This is so precisely on account of chora’s character as feminine, and not in abstraction from it or in exclusion or denial of its actuality. Rather, it is insofar as chora ultimately can be said to be feminine that she functions as the “preorigin which deprives us of assurance”\(^\text{171}\) and not as the totalizing, absolutizing ultimate ground of being that reinforces and returns—always and without remainder—to the selfsame. Interestingly, Weil, who wishes like Cixous to disrupt desire and intentionality because of their absolutizing and totalizing tendencies, also insists on the feminine characterization of chora as mother, and holds up the traditionally “feminine” traits of vulnerability, obedience, and loving self-gift as the models which human beings should imitate—models, it must be noted, that are represented in both the Father’s kenotic creation and chora’s self-giving begetting of the universe.

Naming chora as feminine—mother, nurse, matrix—is a way of describing what she is (although non-essentially), and not only a gestural attempt at speaking that must

always be taken away as soon as it is given. According to Cixous, the feminine is capable of giving without calculation and without expectation in a way that also disrupts the economy of exchange (based on binarisms) that takes place in the order of existents to which she gives (a) place. This is exactly the function of chora. As Cixous explains, “the masculine return to the selfsame is narrower and more restricted than femininity’s. It all happens as if man were more directly threatened in his being by the nonsel...
This process—chora’s work—is the province of the feminine. It is a process of engendering all that exists in and through self-effacement and place-giving; this is not, however, the same as a totalizing, enclosing foundationalism. It “gives neither rest nor security, always disturbs the relationship to ‘reality,’ produces an uncertainty that gets in the way… It is distressing, it wears you out; and for men this permeability, this non-exclusion is a threat, something intolerable.”174 For chora—the feminine—this permeability is precisely what permits her to give and disturb, to engender and disrupt, to nourish and trouble everything that is. Chora’s work “is not done without danger, without pain, without loss… It doesn’t happen without expense.”175 Yet it is in this danger that “she comes out of herself to go to the other…she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be.”176 Chora’s kenosis is not a mechanism for providing a blinding, blessed assurance—for herself or for anything else. On the contrary, in providing a place for the realm of oppositions—for philosophy—chora at the same time threatens and destabilizes it in a way that a (masculine, substance-fixing) ontotheological origin never would.

This point is crucial for Weil as well, whose conceptualization of chora as the unknowable base upon which reality is built and necessity is organized, serves to disrupt the expansive nature of power in the universe and to expose the instrumentalizing economy of exchange as an illusion. Chora represents for Weil a kind of non-being or a vast openness in which the universe is brought to birth; when Weil writes, “Not to

174 Cixous, “A Newly Born Woman,” The Hélène Cixous Reader, 42.
175 Ibid., 43.
exercise all the power at one’s disposal is to endure the void,”¹⁷⁷ she is naming the consequence of a freely-exercised, loving attention to what is other than the self. This form of attention—or consent—brings one into contact with chora, with the void which cradles the cosmos, but which also has the capacity to terrify on account of its tractionless unknowability and immensity. While Weil—like the Neoplatonists—seems at times to read this void which is “below” as a non-being that is somehow evil (or at least a privation of goodness/being), there are just as many instances in which she interprets the void in terms of the Virgin, whose openness and obedience are positive traits for us to emulate, and who represents that aspect of chora which is a necessary pre-requisite to the process of decreation. For, unless we can endure the void and consent to it in love (just as Mary and chora consent to the begetting and existence of the other), we will never be decreated, only destroyed. Indeed, Weil observes that, in order for decreation to take place, “We must become nothing, we must go down to the vegetative level.”¹⁷⁸ Of course, this becoming nothing is an imitation of chora’s status as non-being; however, it is also an imitation of God’s status as utterly powerless in creation, and Christ’s status as inert flesh when he is stretched out on the cross. What is particularly fascinating about Weil’s insistently feminine reading of chora is that it aligns so closely with her reading of divine kenotic love—a love which, in its openness, its deliberate refusal to exercise power maximally, and its projected or infused immanence within the created world of materiality, shares with chora a set of characteristics and behaviors which traditionally have been gendered feminine throughout the history of philosophy and theology.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 163.
¹⁷⁸ Weil, Gravity and Grace, 32.
¹⁷⁹ To wade into the complex and substantial debates about gender essentialism and feminist philosophy—particularly vis-à-vis the “French feminists”—is beyond the scope of this work. My own position is that
The similarity in Weil’s thought between (on the one hand) a God whom we cannot believe exists as (a) being, and (on the other hand) chora, whom we also cannot conceptualize as (a) being, lies in large part in their similarly kenotic character and their similar involvement and role in the creation of the cosmos. Indeed, if humans are to imitate this kind of creative, loving self-surrender, then such an imitation does not imply positing some thing outside oneself, something that is a mere object, but rather making space within oneself… [T]his means that the world is not “the something” that God makes, or posits, “out there.” Rather, cosmology is God’s renunciation of God’s self: it is God’s withdrawal, in order that the world can be. The world is grounded in a fundamental renunciation—God’s thinking nothing, God’s movement away from Godself, choric activity. This means that for Weil there is no-thing left in God’s withdrawing activity. (It is not, as some argue, that in the act of creation God leaves behind some kind of “matter” which becomes formed into the world.) Rather,…Weil’s idea of decreation locates nothing (no one positive object or thing or product or even god) as the heart of the universe.

What this means, then, is that to exist in any kind of substantial, autonomous way—to persist in being something—is to reject the imitatio dei (which is also an emulation of choric generosity and begetting) prescribed by Weil as the mode of [non-]being which we as humans must strive to realize. Such a rejection involves us in an encounter with the choric void just as much as a decreative consent will do. However, it matters immensely whether we choose to accept or refuse this encounter and the model (or inspiration) of self-gift that it offers, for a refusal means that we will continue to be hard, substantial—a “fissure through which grace might pass” but ultimately cannot on account of our spurious autonomy. “Every void (not accepted) produces hatred, sourness, bitterness,

gender essentialism indeed lies behind centuries of misogyny and oppression. However, it may be possible (with certain important caveats) to argue that traditionally feminine traits such as compassion, nurturance, self-abnegation, and the like are not in any way intrinsically feminine, but rather, are traits which should be open to human beings in general, and which, indeed, are fundamentally Christian traits which ought to be emulated by all who consider themselves followers of Jesus. Their status as “gendered” can be attributed to contingent historical and social realities which, as contingent, can and must be altered so as to be more inclusive. Ultimately, it is the principle of self-gift and loving consent to let others exist that is at stake, and this principle is to do, not with gender, but with justice.

180 Inese Radzins, “Choric Inspiration.”
spite… It does away with multiple relationships…”\textsuperscript{181} Yet the acceptance of the void renders selfhood soluble, and transforms us into conduits through which divine eros might pass, into energies which, lured by the pull of divine eros and choric self-gift, are anything but fixed and anything but substantial. “If we accept no matter what void,” writes Weil, then “what stroke of fate can prevent us from loving the universe?”\textsuperscript{182}
CHAPTER 2:

PSYCHIC MATTER, EMBODIED SPIRIT:

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, ETHICS, AND THE RELATIONAL SELF

I. Weil’s Theological Anthropology: Soul and Body, Freedom and Constraint

“If, while outside at night,” writes Simone Weil, “I switch on a flashlight, it’s not by examining the number of amps that I am able to judge its power, but rather, by examining the number of objects it illuminates.”\(^{183}\) This homely illustration is meant to convey an idea that lies at the very center of Weil’s thought: that is, spiritual things cannot be approached or grasped except in and through appreciation for and attention to material things. Material things are, according to Weil, the true measure of spiritual things.\(^{184}\) This idea is developed throughout Weil’s writings, where she argues for the value of the fruits of action over and above the fantasies of the imagination, and in her life as well, which she spent advocating for and living in solidarity with the impoverished, the colonized, and the exploited.

However, Weil’s relentless focus upon the solid reality and significance of everyday objects, and her equally dogged insistence on the importance of attending to the material needs of suffering human beings may appear to be at odds with what we think we know about a dualistic, anti-materialist Platonism which, according to

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\(^{183}\) Simone Weil, *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, 98. Translation mine. Of course, this illustration, though quite simple, has its roots in the Platonic concept of light, not as an object at which we look in itself, but rather, as that which permits us to see other objects clearly.

\(^{184}\) “Les choses charnelles sont le critérium des choses spirituelles.” Ibid.
Heidegger, sets the “true world” of the super-sensuous above the sensuous “world of appearances” below, and values the former while denigrating the latter. Indeed, Weil’s Platonism—and all that it potentially entails—presents itself as a problem for several of her feminist critics, among them novelist and literary critic Joyce Carol Oates, who argues that Weil’s Platonism led her to a body-hating suicide via starvation, and a zealous, chilling condemnation of the things of the world. Yet another potential difficulty with Weil’s Platonism according to some feminist readers is her slightly idiosyncratic but nonetheless recognizably Platonic appropriation of the concept of necessity—a concept which designates for Weil both the abstract ordered relations and scientific laws governing the universe, and the interconnected structural mechanisms of human social and political force which constrain all human beings and—at least to an extent—determine human behaviors. Some feminist critics of Weil express concern that her focus on necessity represents a fatalistic over-valuation of passivity in the face of an unjust status quo, and a concomitant under-valuation of freedom, agency, and the transformative possibilities of hope.

Indeed, Weil’s thought probably cannot lend itself unproblematically to certain permutations of feminist anthropology and ethics. Nevertheless, while these criticisms of Weil are not wholly misplaced, and must be taken seriously, my intention in this

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185 “For Plato, the supersensuous is the true world. It stands over all as what sets the standard. The sensuous lies below, as the world of appearances. What stands over all is alone and from the start what sets the standard. It is therefore what is desired.” Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Vol. I: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 201.
187 See, for example, Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The Vexation of Weil,” *Power Trips and Other Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 22-23. Elshtain argues that Weil’s “too-lofty spiritual subject must be brought down to earth and embodied,” and that the best way to do this is to recover hope for human beings via “the procreative female body” and the metaphor of “natality.”
chapter is to examine Weil’s concepts of body, soul, freedom, and subjectivity in order to draw a clearer picture of her account of matter and the human being, and demonstrate some of the ways in which this account may contribute to an ethical stance that foregrounds justice for the suffering and marginalized and an incarnational appreciation for materiality. Such a stance is not incompatible with feminist ethics—in particular, with feminist theological ethics or the incarnational feminist ethics developed by French philosopher Luce Irigaray. In order to draw out those elements of Weil’s anthropology which might prove most congenial to certain feminist ethical projects, I will triangulate Weil’s account of ethics and anthropology with those of Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray, two twentieth-century philosophers who share many of her concerns vis-à-vis ethics and anthropology, but whose methods and conclusions offer instructive differences from Weil’s. There is within scholarship a history of reading Weil’s ethical orientation toward the other in a manner that brings her work close to the Levinasian ethical project.\textsuperscript{188} There is a concomitant dissociation of Weil’s anthropology—perceived as anti-embodiment—from that of someone like Irigaray, whose work consists in large part of a re-reading of Platonism (and its offshoots in the Western tradition) that is designed to displace the traditional western visual heuristic in favor of a new focus on embodiment and touch. Weil’s consistent use of and appreciation for seemingly-standard Platonic optical imagery might appear to be at odds with an Irigaraian emphasis on body-based tropes. However, my intention in this chapter is to read Weil with Irigaray and against Levinas in order to demonstrate the ways in which a Weilian

theological anthropology manages on the one hand to avoid certain of the problems that arise within the Levinasian ethical dyad, and on the other hand contains important resources for a feminist theological ethic that emphasizes incarnation and a relational non-subjectivity that abstains from instrumentalizing others by operating in a mode of non-acting action. Before working out this triangulation, it will be helpful first to examine the Platonic, Cartesian, Kantian, and Stoic influences on Weil’s psychology and anthropology in order to understand both Weil’s idiosyncratic appropriation of this philosophical inheritance, and the ways in which she departs from it. Because the traces of these influences in Weil’s thought are rendered visible partly in the metaphors and illustrations she employs when discussing the relationship between body, soul, God and the surrounding world, I will look closely at Weil’s use of imagery related to energy, desire, and mechanics in her elaboration of anthropology and subjectivity.

Weil takes issue with philosophies which attempt to locate the dignity and sacrality of human existence in this or that particular element or aspect of human existence, whether it be the personality, the body, the soul, or the possession of certain “inalienable rights.” Weil claims instead that, for any given individual, “It is neither his person, nor the human personality in him, which is sacred to me. It is he. The whole of him. The arms, the eyes, the thoughts, everything. Not without infinite scruple would I touch anything of his.”¹⁸⁹ Weil acknowledges that this reticence to commit injury when faced with another human being is difficult to express or explain in a concise manner, particularly since experience teaches us that the world is full of human beings who

commit horrors and injure others all the time. Nevertheless, Weil observes that “At the bottom of the heart of every human being…there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.” Rather than locating this sacred character in a particular aspect of the human being, Weil argues for its illuminating presence within the whole human being, such that the entire person is suffused with this longing for goodness. This attention to the whole human being serves as a corrective to those theories that emphasize empirical elements of personhood or natural or essential definitions of human dignity, since in Weil’s thinking, these essences and naturally-grounded elements are never sufficient to safeguard humanity’s sacred dignity against the forces of political oppression, economic exploitation, abuses of power, or selfish caprice. For Weil, that which is sacred in human beings is not an essence, but rather an orientation toward what she calls “a reality outside the world,” a dynamic relationship with an absolute good. Already it is clear that, for Weil, human beings are constituted dynamically and relationally, and not essentially or substantially.

This longing for what is good (and the concomitant horror of what is evil) represents for Weil a universal human orientation toward an authentic goodness and justice—a goodness and a justice which are never wholly realized in the world, but which can be instantiated in the world when humans recognize this longing for what it is and turn their attention to its cultivation and development. Weil refers to this orientation

190 Indeed, Weil very bluntly observes that “unless supernatural grace intervenes, there is no form of cruelty or depravity of which ordinary, decent people are not capable” (The Need for Roots, 112).
191 Ibid., 315.
as the supernatural or highest part of the soul; its existence both enables human beings to recognize when they are being injured and to cry out for justice and mercy, and—when encouraged and tended to—permits them to nurture in themselves and then act upon a just love for others. This is the case, Weil contends, because in directing our attention to genuine justice and goodness, we cannot be focused on our own claims and assertions of rights, and instead become able to see with increasing clarity of vision the obligations we have to others and the very real existence of others in and for themselves, and not as mere instruments for our ends, or obstacles in the way of our self-gratification.

According to Weil, whoever recognizes the existence of an unconditioned justice or goodness also will be capable of recognizing the presence within all human beings of a longing for that goodness. “Because of it,” writes Weil, such a person “holds every human being without any exception as something sacred to which he is bound to show respect. This is the only possible motive for universal respect towards all human beings.”193 This longing for or orientation toward goodness itself—even when good deeds and kind words are in short supply in the world—enables the supernatural part of the soul to “irradi[ate] with light any human being whatsoever,”194 and to govern and regulate the status and actions of the human being as a whole. In other words, Weil, realizing the difficulty of making generally- and incontestably-applicable arguments about the rights of all human beings, advocates an ethical stance that moves from the

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193 Ibid., 220.
194 Ibid., 221. More will be said on Weil’s use of such light- and energy-related metaphors later in the chapter.
particular—that is, this or that concrete human being with these particular, tangible needs and afflictions—to the universal.\textsuperscript{195}

It is not sufficient, however, simply to long for goodness and justice, and to contemplate their tragic impossibility in the world, nor even to recognize this link to unconditioned goodness that is present in others once we have recognized its existence within ourselves. Indeed, according to Weil, “Human nature is so arranged that a desire of the soul, unless it passes through the flesh by means of actions, movements, and postures that naturally correspond to it, hasn’t any reality for the soul. It dwells there only as a phantom.”\textsuperscript{196} However significant and sacred the highest, supernatural part of the soul may be, it nevertheless lacks purchase in the real world if it remains untethered to the two “lower” parts of the soul and to the body, which are the only means through which it can be made present in our everyday words and actions. As Weil states,

Beneath the faculty of supernatural contemplation is found a part of the soul which is at the level of obligation and for which the opposition of good and evil must have all possible force. Still lower is the animal part of the soul, which must be methodically trained by a wise combination of whiplashes and lumps of sugar. In those who love God, …the natural part of the soul is always entirely subject to mechanical necessity. But the presence of supernatural love in the soul constitutes a new factor of the mechanism and transforms it.\textsuperscript{197}

In order to understand the architecture of the psychology and philosophical anthropology that Weil presents in this passage, it is important to realize that this architecture is rooted in the Neoplatonic schematization of the soul as microcosm—that is, a miniature representation of the forces and elements that constitute the universe itself. In Weil’s architecture, the highest, supernatural part of the soul is connected to the presence of the

\textsuperscript{195} Weil’s schematization of particularity and universality will be addressed at greater length later in the chapter, when we will be able to see the Kantian inflection of Weil’s thought on this issue.


unconditioned goodness beyond the world and hence is free from the constraints of necessity; the “natural” part of the soul exists in the realm of the intellect and the will, and is subject to necessity as it plays out in the opposition of good and evil and the human experience in the world as a being conditioned by temporality; and the “animal” part of the soul—a kind of intelligible or psychic matter—exhibits either evil or beauty depending on whether or not it permits itself to be guided and governed by the presence of supernatural love in the highest part of the soul. According to Weil, no loving regard for another human being can manifest itself, no obligation toward another person can be recognized and fulfilled, without the actions and movements of the body—about which more will be said presently. In this way, Weil’s theological anthropology draws upon the neoplatonic psychology found in Plotinus, for whom the superior part of the soul remains simultaneously in the presence of nous in the intelligible realm and in the human body where it informs and directs action, even as the inferior, “shadowy,” or material parts of the soul reside and operate within the material realm. It should be noted, incidentally, that for Weil, these parts of the soul are not in any literal sense crudely-defined faculties which can be separated from one another and examined or analyzed in discrete segments. Rather, she considers these parts of the soul in terms of dynamic overlapping fields, or subtly telescoping levels of “being-toward” that are constituted by the direction in which they are oriented and their dynamism in light of this or that particular telos rather than by some perduring essence or substance.

Weil’s psychology clearly owes much to Plato’s famous image of the chariot propelled by either willful or obedient horses. Like Plato, she holds that the higher, supernatural part of the soul must be permitted to inform and govern the lower parts of

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198 See, for example, Plotinus’ discussion in the Enneads I:1,7; I:4,14; II:5; II:3,9; III:8,5; and VI:7,5.
the soul and the passions of the body if the human being is to become capable of acting justly. Thus, she writes that, when the human being who loves God consents via the supernatural part of the soul to obey God, “nature is…changed by the presence of the supernatural.”¹⁹⁹ This change of nature does not take the form of a miraculous intervention by God in the network of secondary causes that constitute the universe, however. Rather, Weil (like Plato) employs an illustration to describe the alteration that a human being undergoes when she turns her attention to the good:

We are like shipwrecked persons clinging to logs upon the sea and tossed in an entirely passive manner by every movement of the waves. From the height of heaven God throws each one a rope. He who seizes the rope and does not let go, despite the pain and the fear, remains as much as the others subject to the buffeting of the waves; only for him these buffets combine with the tension of the cord to form a different mechanical whole.²⁰⁰

The rope represents for Weil that tiny portion of the soul which remains always in contact with the good beyond the world, and which she sometimes calls the capacity for consent, and other times calls the perpetual and ineradicable longing for the good. God, in throwing the rope to each human being, neither alters nor ameliorates the conditions of the stormy sea nor forces the human being to grasp the rope. Nor does God enter directly into the world, or exist for humans in any unmediated fashion. Rather, in consenting to hold to the rope, the human being experiences her body, together with the rope, the sea’s motion, and that part of her soul which remains committed to the painful and rough contact with God (through the rope), as a unified whole whose movements and behaviors will be markedly different than they were before reaching for the rope. Nature is indeed transformed by the presence of the supernatural, but the change is so subtle that it may go unnoticed. Just as the soul in Plato’s illustration in the *Phaedrus*

²⁰⁰ Ibid.
gains only a glimpse of justice, wisdom and knowledge when he lifts his head “into the outer world,” so also does Weil’s storm-tossed soul maintain only the most tenuous connection with the good beyond the world. This connection, far from reinforcing the strength, constitution, or substance of the human being, simply operates as a mark of that human’s orientation toward something—a good beyond the world—that cannot otherwise be experienced or even schematized. Nevertheless, the glimpse of justice, the tenuous link to divine love, can prove sufficient to change the actions of the whole human being.

Weil’s focus in this latter passage on the freedom of the individual to consent to continued contact with the divine, and the sovereignty of the will in making a decision which so clearly defines the individual and delineates the boundaries of her autonomous selfhood, obviously owes something to Descartes. Indeed, like that of Descartes, Weil’s method for developing a philosophical anthropology foregrounds the importance of doubt in determining what can be known with certainty. This capacity to doubt is, for Weil as for Descartes, the hallmark of every free individual and the cornerstone of any awareness of self, world, and God that is to avoid illusion and the pitfalls of imaginary constructions. Weil departs from the Cartesian position, however, with her claim that consciousness in and of itself cannot guarantee knowledge. For Weil, the Cartesian cogito is insufficient for safeguarding the free and certain existence of the self: “Insofar as I am conscious of myself, I am anything whatever; what my consciousness reveals to me is not me but my consciousness of myself, just as it does not reveal things to me, but

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the consciousness I have of things."\textsuperscript{202} The result of Weil’s position seems at first to be an experience of subjectivity that has much in common with her description of the shipwrecked person who is tossed about by the sea-swells in which she is subsumed. Even consciousness—or consciousness of one’s consciousness—cannot stabilize this situation by providing a limit-concept for doubt. For Weil, consciousness itself is in bondage to the “primordial, indefinable feelings [of pleasure and pain that] are the medium through which the world appears to consciousness."\textsuperscript{203} For Weil, then, to stop where the Cartesian \textit{cogito} stops is to risk an infinite regress, since Weil’s human being is always already embedded to a much greater degree than Descartes’ human being in the sense perceptions, experiences, and feelings manifested by the surrounding world (whether illusory or no). For Descartes, the skeptical method comes up against its outer reach when it achieves an awareness of its own consciousness, which serves to guarantee its existence. For Weil however, the existence that Descartes has secured at this stage is too abstract to be considered either real or stable, largely because it overleaps too quickly the insistent impenetrability of the appearances, experiences, and sensations that are mediated through material extension and not only the doubting mind. Even the consciousness that serves (at the conclusion of the Cartesian process of doubt) to guarantee the independent existence of the self has for Weil a greater continuity with the body and with the mediation of perceptions than it does for Descartes. \textit{W}rites Weil, “What I call the world of ideas is no less chaos than the world of sensations. Ideas impose their ways of being on me, take hold of me, escape me… Everything is given


over to Descartes’ ‘evil genius,’ which is nothing but chance… In other words, nothing that transpires in my consciousness has any reality other than the consciousness that I have of it; the only knowledge I have is to be conscious of what I am conscious of:”

Weil claims that “everything is on the same level,” making it pointless to assume that somehow, consciousness permits us to move from the sensible to the intelligible plane, thereby securing our existence as a thinking being.

However, this chaos does not necessarily devolve into an infinite regress, according to Weil. She holds that Descartes’ method of doubting is not itself the problem; rather, the problem is that he does not continue to doubt, even when he hits upon consciousness. If we continue on past that point, observes Weil, we begin to see that it is not consciousness itself that allows us to be sure of our existence, but rather, the power that is operative within consciousness and thought, even when this power is considered simply as the power of our thoughts to deceive us. As Weil explains, once we have recognized that everything that presents itself to us (from sensations to our self-awareness and existence) is an illusion, we are at first unable to see our way out of this situation into some form of certitude. Yet there remains a crack through which freedom and subjectivity can gain a foothold: the power we exercise over our own beliefs.

Precisely because Weil’s human being is embedded in the world in a greater degree and experiences everything more concretely by means of mediation and embodied sense perception, Weil is able to claim that

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204 Weil, “Science and Perception in Descartes,” Formative Writings, 57.
205 Ibid. Philosopher Olli Lagerspetz makes an argument that is substantially quite similar to Weil’s on this point, albeit in a quite different idiom. He focuses on “the impossibility of defining or describing consciousness without including relevant parts of the ‘external’ world in the picture.” Olli Lagerspetz, “Experience and Consciousness in the Shadow of Descartes,” Philosophical Psychology 15.1 (2002), 15.
It is I who think these things that produce illusion, and whether I think of them as certainties or illusions, the spell that they cast over me remains intact. [However,] the power that I exercise over my own beliefs is not an illusion; it is through this power that I know that I think... And through this power of thinking—which so far is revealed to me only by the power of doubting—I know that I am. I have power, therefore I am [Je puis, donc je suis].206

For Weil as for Descartes, subjectivity has an intimate connection to freedom; it is the freedom to doubt everything that eventually permits the development of a concept of selfhood and autonomy.207

Yet for Weil, the embeddedness of the human being and the concomitant experience of everything—even self-consciousness—as mediated, has a twofold significance. Very basically, it means that the self is always considered as the integration of mind and extension; consciousness ultimately can never be abstracted from the human being and isolated as the principle (or guarantor) of existence; although the skeptical method makes such an abstraction temporarily necessary in order to proceed, it cannot be a terminus, and thus, for Weil, the end result cannot be an isolated, autonomous, disembodied subject.208 Yet more than this, human embeddedness also means that for Weil, existence is intrinsically and ineluctably ethical; it is always oriented toward the freedom to act in a certain way, to employ power over one’s thought in a manner that furthers freedom and permits one the power to understand and engage...
with the world (however limited such power might be—and Weil thinks it is quite limited, indeed). In her earlier writing, Weil focuses on the role of the will in this ethical engagement with the world and with others—witness the emphasis on pouvoir in her re-writing of the Cartesian formula and the fact that she understands existence in terms of a power to act rather than a substantial element of the self. Later on, however, Weil begins reading the will in terms of attention; as with the will, attention is the locus of freedom and consent, but with the added dimension of desire or intentionality, which directs the will’s engagement with the world in light of the love for the good beyond the world. This will have important implications for a feminist theological ethic, as we will see later in the chapter. Indeed, as Wanda Tommasi writes,

Simone Weil suggests that we must look for the truth ourselves, not in an illusory interiority whose questioning always risks lapsing into a complacent introspection but outside ourselves: in that actions that we have accomplished, in the reactions that we have elicited from others, in the traces that we have left on things.209

Far from championing a gnostic anti-materialism or even a Cartesian interiority which precludes contact with the world and with others, Weil understands the human being as someone who is always already a being with particular ethical obligations, and whose subjectivity is constituted relationally and concretely.

Even in an ideally ethical situation, however, when we are able to direct our attention to unconditioned goodness and thereby cultivate the presence of supernatural love in the highest part of the soul, Weil clearly holds that the effects and expressions of this love in the rest of the human being—soul and body—are constrained or limited by the workings of necessity. Indeed, for Weil, it sometimes seems that the forces of necessity which govern both the interconnected physical elements of the universe and the

interlocking structures of the social order so thoroughly determine our relationships with others and our actions in the world, that there remains little room for freedom or agency. She insists that “The reality of this world is necessity. The part of [the human being] which is in this world is the part which is in bondage to necessity and subject to the misery of need.”\textsuperscript{210} However, this bondage to the relentless, blind structures of necessity does not completely and wholly foreclose all possibility of freedom for the human being, since the longing for unconditioned goodness which constitutes the supernatural part of the soul remains—in a certain manner of speaking—outside the world, at least in its orientation. The rest of the human being—the intellect and will, the animal or material part of the soul, and the body—cannot escape its status as wholly embedded in the networks of power and the mechanical forces that comprise the structures of the universe and society. This is the case whether or not we recognize the situation for what it really is. According to Weil,

\begin{quote}
[We] can never escape from obedience to God. A creature cannot but obey. The only choice given to [us] as intelligent and free creatures is to desire obedience or not to desire it. If a man does not desire it, he obeys all the same, perpetually, inasmuch as he is a thing subject to mechanical necessity. If he does desire it, he is still subject to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity is added to it, a necessity constituted by the laws pertaining to supernatural things.\textsuperscript{211}
\end{quote}

In other words, insofar as we are embedded within the workings of cosmological and social necessity, we cannot but obey it, just as we cannot avoid obeying the force of gravity. This condition obtains even when we believe we are behaving and making choices with total freedom, since for Weil, such a belief is merely a sign of the imagination’s delusive sway over one’s subjectivity. Indeed, according to Weil, the

portion of the soul which has the capacity to consent should have as its goal the transformation of the mediocre or natural part of the soul into the res extensa of the body. That is, the whole of the human being ought to become as obedient to necessity as the matter in the waves of the sea or the folds of the hills, which Weil calls “a perfect model for us… [o]n account of its perfect obedience.”

Like the sea or the hills, we are always already subject to the workings of necessity, even when we do not realize this. Yet for those who do recognize their bondage to necessity in all aspects except for the supernatural part of the soul, such recognition opens the way toward an exercise of freedom, because it permits even the aspects of the human being that are subject to necessity to participate in the freedom of the supernatural part of the soul.

Weil envisions this exercise of freedom as a form of consent or obedience to God’s love as it manifests itself in the supernatural part of the soul. “The whole universe,” writes Weil, “is a compact mass of obedience. This compact mass is sprinkled with points of light. Each one of these points is the supernatural part of the soul of a reasonable creature who loves God and consents to obey. The rest of the soul is held in the compact mass.” While it is true that this sphere of freedom does not seem exceptionally large—at least by the standards of the post-industrial West, where the dominant, consumerist-inflected definition of freedom tends to be one that equates it with maximal yet superficial choice—Weil herself nevertheless considers it a genuine freedom, and moreover, genuinely capable of affecting the actions undertaken by those[214]

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212 Ibid., 447.
213 Weil’s position avoids the principle problem with a gnostic (broadly-defined) rationalization in which to know and understand is to be liberated, since for her, the human being’s status as finite and created serves to limit the emancipatory efficacy of a knowledgeable acceptance of our embeddedness in the networks of necessity.
who choose to exercise it. Indeed, she explicitly criticizes the maximal concept of freedom, preferring instead a notion of freedom as attentive, loving consent to that which is: “[Attention] presupposes faith and love. Another form of freedom than that of choice is bound up with it, which is on the level of the will—namely, grace.” Here it is possible to see the shift from an exclusive emphasis on the will as the locus of freedom in Weil’s earlier work to a re-reading of will as graced attention—a shift that Miklos Vetö characterizes as the most significant way in which Weil appropriates and creatively adapts Kant’s concept of freedom vis-à-vis the will.

For Weil, in order to direct free and loving attention toward another human being, one must consent to the workings of necessity. This means that one is “to accept the existence of all that exists, including the evil, excepting only that portion of evil which we have the possibility, and the obligation, of preventing.” This notion of accepting the existence of all that exists is not a tautology; rather, it highlights the importance in Weil’s thought of minimizing the kind of self-preoccupation so often occasioned by a stubborn desire to obtain some future good or revive (or revenge) some past event. This sort of self-preoccupation keeps us from even seeing other human beings except insofar as they appear to exist as instruments or obstacles in the attaining of our own desires. Moreover, as Weil notes, this acceptance should not entail a passive stance toward a status quo that is evil, unjust, or oppressive; on the contrary, the free exercise of the

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215 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 205.
216 In discussing a Kantian anthropology in which human subjectivity operates in a matrix of tension between conformity to the moral law and motive-driven behavior that runs contrary to the moral law, Vetö explains, “For Kant, the regime of division human beings are subject to tolerates no permanent cure; the struggle is always renewed, the effort is never ‘natural.’” [But] for the mystic Weil became toward the end of her life, the goal is a radical mutation, the passage over a threshold.” This passage is at least in part enabled via grace, “without which, according to Weil, one never passes from the Kantian synthetic condition to the analytic perfection of mystical Platonism” (The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil, 67-8).
supernatural part of the soul in consenting to the existence of things as they are is precisely what allows someone to see others more clearly and act more justly and lovingly. This is because “Anyone whose attention and love are really directed towards the reality outside the world recognizes at the same time that he is bound, both in public and private life, by the single and permanent obligation to remedy, according to his responsibilities and to the extent of his power, all the privations of soul and body which are liable to destroy or damage the earthly life of any human being whatsoever.” The free consent granted to the world as it is, far from being merely a passive form of obedience, is instead an affirmation of the significance and dignity of the everyday realities of human existence even in the face of suffering and despair. It represents, not a capitulation to the oppressive powers that enslave human beings, but rather, an illumination of the concrete and particular conditions of the present moment. This sort of illumination is precisely what is required in order to address those aspects of reality which are brutalizing, unjust, or exploitative. Such an illumination comes from the light of supernatural love which gains graced purchase in the world via the channel opened in a soul where free consent has been given.

Weil’s notion of freedom as an obligation to consent to the existence of others and to refuse to instrumentalize them owes an obvious debt to Kant. Like Kant, Weil sees freedom—understood as that which permits us to subscribe to a maxim for which we feel no partiality and perhaps even feel repugnance—as the resolution of the human dilemma; namely, that human beings are continually subject to egoist desires or “motives,” and yet are required to conform and consent to the moral law, which requires that we renounce these desires, particularly as they play out in the ethical sphere.

Innovatively revising her teacher Alain’s reading of the Kantian relationship between judgment, freedom, and the will, Weil explains that an understanding of and an acquiescence to the structures of necessity are the constitutive elements of human liberty: “Living man can on no account cease to be hemmed in on all sides by an absolutely inflexible necessity; but since he is a thinking creature, he can choose between either blindly submitting to the spur with which necessity pricks him from outside, or else adapting himself to the inner representation of it that he forms in his own mind; and it is in this that the contrast between servitude and liberty lies.” The Kantian elements here are visible: the role of the mind in structuring experience, the importance of reason and the will’s capacity to act according to reason, the limits of reason, and the intersection of thought and ethical action as the locus of freedom. Indeed, it is in part the Kantian influence that accounts for Weil’s redaction of Descartes in the direction of the mind’s greater embeddedness in the world and the body, the significance of the sensible, and the greater degree of mediation between the world and the self.

For Weil as for Kant, freedom is not a matter of avoiding obligation or somehow moving outside of the phenomenal world in order to escape constraint, finitude, and limitation. Rather, Weil makes freedom almost coextensive with (or at least a concomitant of) the ethical stance occasioned by loving consent to the existence of others, and the concrete obligations that such a stance necessarily and continuously

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221 For an excellent discussion of the extent to which Weil’s Kantian influence—mediated through Alain and Alain’s teacher, the neo-Kantian Lagneau—accounts for this aspect of her thought, see Narcy, “The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil’s Platonism,” *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*. Noting Weil’s references to Lagneau, Narcy explains (p. 29) that “Lagneau represents a mode of thought that rejects the separation of the intelligible from the perceivable, and for which, quite the opposite, the inherence of the intelligible in the perceivable is at once the lesson taken from and the key to perception.”
entails. Like Kant, Weil understands these obligations to be eternal, universal, and unconditional, and sees the consent to obligation and constraint as corresponding to “freedom itself.” Yet Weil, unlike Kant, was sensitive to one of the principal difficulties presented by such universal obligations, namely, the extent to which an unconditional obligation flattens out all concrete individuality, both for the one who is carrying out the obligation, and the one whose needs are being met in this or that specific and contingent context. Kant’s development of the categorical imperative, along with the rationalist structures that undergird its significance and operation in the sphere of ethics, are designed to bolster subjectivity and autonomy, not to undermine them. For Weil, however, the concept of free consent to moral obligations is designed to do precisely the opposite: instead of permitting the moral agent to come into her own as a free and autonomous subject, the Weilian notion of freedom *qua* attentive consent serves to *frustrate* the accretion of being around some spurious node of subjectivity. Weil is able to “read” freedom as obedient consent to necessity just as Kant does—a move that initially might seem counter-intuitive. Yet she makes this move in a non-Kantian manner, by conjugating freedom through a concept of consent that unites the intellect to desire for the good; that is, through a concept of thinking as “true seeing” (or—as I will argue—“true contact with reality”), which is more closely aligned to Plato than to Kant. Unlike Kant—or Descartes, for that matter—Weil’s notion of thinking is “so closely connected with absence of self or self-effort as to make the terms ‘thinking’ and ‘freedom’ virtually interchangeable in her grammar… The thinker here is not the

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Cartesian ego (‘the self which knows the self’) but the inspiring source itself, manifesting through us only when no ego or agent is in the way. Indeed, even if one interprets Kant’s universalization of maxims as an attempt to develop a kind of impersonal, perspectiveless, ethical subjectivity, Weil’s (non)-subjectivity goes further still, since for Weil, “[i]t is not a matter of simply putting my personality in parentheses, but of dissolving that voracious existence I call myself.” Thus, attention given freely to others without egoist attempts to instrumentalize or assimilate them does not develop the autonomous self, but rather teaches us our lack of agency and being, and ultimately becomes a consent to and an acknowledgement of our actual status as non-being. Freedom operates in the service of selflessness, and not in the service of autonomy.

What this means, then, for Weil’s modified Kantianism, is that obedience to the universal and unconditional moral law does not involve an eradication of particularity on either side of an obligation. Nor does it allow for a flight from the constraint of necessity—something which remains true for Weil even in her later writings, where the concept of the will shifts to that of a grace-infused attention. Instead, the “renunciation of the ego allows one to ‘see’ what the moral dimension of necessity demands and to love the world just as it is, rather than for what it provides a sense of ego.” Because of this capacity to “see” clearly the precise nature and context of our moral obligations, we are free to act accordingly, and in such a way that the particular, concrete needs of others are met—on others’ terms, and not on ours. “Never in this world,” observes Weil, “can there be any dimensional equality between an obligation and its subject. The obligation

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225 Vetö, The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil, 32.
is something infinite, the subject of it is not.” Rather than taking the infinite structure of the obligation as a license for formalizing and universalizing its content, however, Weil acknowledges that the specific content of obligations—the definite shapes they take and the guises they assume in this or that context—is wholly dependent upon the particular, contingent, concrete needs of the finite subject of the obligation. Thus, while she shares with Kant his interpretation of freedom as obligation, she avoids many of the problems that arise in connection with his universalization of maxims, his emphasis on the development of the rational and autonomous subject, and his flattening of contingency and concrete particularity, both for the one who fulfills an obligation and the one whose need is thereby met.

Weil’s anthropology, which takes freedom-as-consent to be the “highest” part of the soul and that aspect of human existence in which all other parts of the human soul and body ought to participate—has not infrequently been linked to a kind of Stoic anthropology and cosmology. In fact, Weil herself claims that “Descartes was to some extent” a Stoic, as was Kant “a little.” The extent to which Weil claims a Stoic character for her intellectual forebears is at least in part the extent to which they emphasize “the relation between thought and morality.” Weil saw decreation—and the ensuing relational-ethical “non-self”—and not a Kantian (or even Cartesian) Selbstbildung as the means by which one becomes truly human. Weil is quick to point

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230 Ibid., 177.
out that her Stoic-influenced concept of non-being (or purely relational being in my reading) has nothing to do with a joyless resignation or a thoroughgoing determinism that precludes freedom. She observes, rather, that freedom—interpreted as freedom from egoist impulses and desires and not freedom for the unrestrained fulfillment of those desires—is at the center of the Stoic understanding of the human being. “The natural outcome of the idea that man can always be free,” Weil writes, “is Stoic optimism; ancient stoicism was a universal love for everything, not the so-called ‘stoic resignation’ as is commonly said today. The world is our country because it allows us to live as men, always; we are its citizens.”231 Already in these lectures from 1933-34, we see Weil’s emphasis on a love-infused free consent to the conditions of the world as the locus of our humanity and the condition for the possibility of an ethical engagement with the world.

Weil’s original interpretation of Stoicism has important implications for her theological anthropology, since she holds that it is the Stoic love for creation (and all that is within it) which serves as a largely-forgotten influence on the Christian conception of the whole human being as a locus of value:

Christianity will not be incarnated so long as there is not joined to it the Stoic’s idea of filial piety for the city of the world, for the country of here below which is the universe. When, as the result of some misapprehension very difficult to understand today, Christianity cut itself off from Stoicism, it condemned itself to an abstract and separate existence.232

Weil’s earlier stress on freedom as the willed consent to necessity shifts here in the analogous yet more explicitly theological direction of freedom as the exercise of a loving, engaged attention to necessity and to the human beings and material objects that make up the networks of necessity. Weil writes that, in emptying ourselves of our false

231 Ibid., 178.
divinity, we “consent to the rule of mechanical necessity of matter and of free choice at the center of each soul. Such consent is love. The face of this love, which is turned toward thinking persons, is the love of our neighbor; the face turned toward matter is love of the order of the world.”

Weil here brings together the notion that freedom-as-consent in the highest part of the soul operates together with the necessity which constrains psychic matter and the body in order to bring about loving and ethical attention to our neighbors and to creation. The element of love which enters in at this juncture (and serves to modify slightly Weil’s earlier, more Cartesian and Kantian discussions of the human being) is something Weil derives from her increasing engagement with Plato and the Neoplatonists, and also from her reading of the Stoics.

It brings to her anthropology—already incarnational and oriented in the direction of bringing the good into the world, as we saw via an examination of her Platonic, Cartesian, and Kantian inheritance—a more fully realized vision of attention as a mediation between the highest part of the soul and the rest of the soul and body.

In her interpretation of a Stoic anthropology, it is not that Weil discounts the Stoic condemnation of the passions and their relationship to the body. Rather, she claims that the Stoics developed a conception of materiality that holds in tension the doubled human experience of matter as an integral and constitutive part of our being and identity, and also as something against which we are constantly struggling in order to be free of

\[\text{233} \text{ Ibid., 160.} \]
\[\text{234} \text{ Meltzer in “The Hands of Simone Weil” (p. 612) argues that attention “is…bound up in desire (here Weil is strongly influenced by her reading of the Stoics).” I agree with this genealogy, but I think that Meltzer over-emphasizes the distinction that she sees Weil making between attention and the will. Meltzer underlines this distinction in service of her point that work is the mediating concept between Weil’s religious and Marxian streams of thought. Insofar as attention is a kind of intellectual labor, it can be differentiated from the I-centered language of the will, and become part of the broader Weilian reading of labor. Instead, I see Weil’s emphasis on the centrality of the will in human existence as something that shifts in the direction of a love-infused attention later in her life, but is never abandoned or sharply distinguished from the will.}\]
the limitations it so often generates. In her discussion of the Stoics in the *Lectures on Philosophy* she cites Kant’s illustration of a dove, which, while flying, encounters the wind simultaneously as resistance and as that which allows it to remain aloft. For Weil, this is a crucial insight about the human condition:

> [W]e have to struggle against the world as a swimmer does against the water, as the dove struggles against the air, but we have to love it as the swimmer loves the water that bears him up… The Stoics brought these two feelings together and it is the second which seems more important—that of the love of the world.

Closely connected to this Stoic (and for that matter, Christian) love for materiality as a kind of mediation of the divine order is Weil’s highly-developed set of ideas concerning asceticism and the way in which the body can be employed in the service of its own decreation—a decreation which, it must be remembered, is not a form of masochism, but rather a means of becoming a purified, relational conduit through which God’s love can be made manifest to others in actions which strive to engender justice and mitigate suffering.

According to Weil, free consent to the existence of the universe—attention—functions as a thoroughgoing love for it. But this free consent has nothing to do with the sort of grasping, acquisitive love that seeks to make the beloved object into an instrument for its own self-development. It is instead a form of “non-acting action” in which the body and the soul (as the locus of free consent) are at the same time brought into

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235 *Weil, Lectures on Philosophy*, 180. This concept of matter as simultaneously obstacle and medium is one that appears again and again in her writing. It is one of the ideas that links her most closely to Christian Platonism, since it is one she shares with the Cappadocian Fathers, Clement, Irenaeus, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross among many others. This ambivalent attitude toward the body and materiality has been widely documented as an integral part of the Christian tradition.


237 This concept of “non-acting action” will be discussed at greater length in the second half of this chapter and in the fifth chapter.
harmony with each other and with necessity read as the order or beauty of the world.

The highest part of the soul is the locus of this free consent; Weil claims that its function vis-à-vis a lived engagement with the world is “to contemplate each flying moment and, whatever its content may be, to say: ‘I consent that this should stop immediately, and I consent that it should go on forever.”238 More than merely suggesting a form of insensitivity or resignation, however, Weil’s idea of consent implies love.239 Weil’s concept of “non-acting action” and her notion of a loving consent that facilitates the interpretation of necessity as beauty both owe much to her encounter with non-Western religious and philosophical traditions, but it also is possible to see in this the Stoic influence on her thought, since for Weil, “[t]he world is only beautiful for him who experiences amor fati.”240 Part of amor fati and the Stoic harmony between soul and body on the one hand and self and world on the other consists, not only in the love of what exists, but also in the acceptance of suffering and its value as a tool for decration—an “apprenticeship” that ineluctably and intimately brings together the soul and the body in unexpected ways.

II. Weil and Levinas: Ethics, Intentionality, and the Other

Weil’s notion of apprenticeship, which has its roots in the tradition of religious asceticism, in her personal encounters with physical suffering and hunger, and in her

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own experience of factory and agricultural labor, is meant to serve as a concretely-applicable technology of decreation and a means of describing and mapping out the path of free consent to the existence of the world and of others. For Weil,

Apprenticeship must bring about a radical transformation of the biological body that extends beyond mere conditioning and reaches the somatic source of imagination, which is largely responsible for the egocentric readings of self and world. Weil emphasizes that any change in one’s manner of thinking is an illusion if the body has not participated in that change; no amount of reflection or intellectual work alone can bring about the profound change of perspective she believes is possible. Inevitably, Weil thinks, the somatic practice or apprenticeship will include physical suffering, as necessity can only be contacted by the body through that means.\textsuperscript{241}

Because Weil’s concept of the human being is one in which the highest part of the soul participates in both the good that lies “beyond the world” \textit{and} in the everyday realities of human existence, soul and body cannot be prised apart, even if each aspect of the human being encounters the world differently. The body becomes in Weil’s view an instrument—like the blind man’s stick or the writer’s pencil which she so frequently mentions—by which the thinking being can encounter necessity and experience its constraints. In doing so, the psychic matter and the faculty of consent within a human being can—and should—be themselves transformed into something akin to the body’s material reality as well, the better to express obedience to necessity and love for the world and for others.

Weil develops the concept of “energies” in order to describe the relationship between the body and the soul and to offer a schematization of the method by which “apprenticeship” transforms, purifies, and renders fully relational both the body and the soul. According to Weil, “Every phenomenon is a modification of the distribution of energy, and consequently is determined by the laws of energy…”\textsuperscript{241}Pirruccello, “Making the World My Body,” 484.
phenomena, like physical phenomena, are modifications in the distribution and quality of
energy, and are determined by the laws of energetics." For Weil, then, the Freudian
attempt to extend "the study of the soul into a science" is not in itself misplaced, and
her schematization of the energies that constitute the human being shares some
superficial similarities with his project, particularly regarding the notion that there are
"levels" of being and thinking, and that these levels correspond to certain levels of self-
deception (which Weil connects to the Freudian term "repression"). However, for Weil,
the idea that there could be energies and modes of being for which we are not morally
responsible is both problematic and implausible. She holds instead that

We are completely responsible for the degree of clarity there is in our own
thoughts; we do not always make the necessary effort to become fully aware of
them, but we always have the ability to become so… So in reality, psychological consciousness and moral consciousness are one and the same.
One owes it to oneself to achieve this psychological consciousness. All bad
action is an action which implies a repression; every action which does not imply it is good.  

For Weil, then, the ethical quality of our actions—our manner of being in the world and
the aims toward which we orient ourselves justly or unjustly—can be said to correspond
to the degree of clarity with which we perceive our true, underlying (and generally ego-
driven) motives for undertaking those actions. A greater or lesser degree of moral
consciousness correlates with a greater or lesser degree of attentive love and justice in
our engagement with others. What makes this correlation plausible is Weil’s discussion
of the concept of energies, which operate as the non-substantial, erotic, and inherently
intentional “content” of a human being’s existence. Weil’s concept of energies serves

243 Ibid., 294.
244 Weil, Lectures on Philosophy, 98.
245 My use of the term is more or less Husserlian in nature. That is, I understand intentionality very
basically as the notion that consciousness is always consciousness of something, and therefore,
as the link between being, thinking, and acting; the kind and quality of energy that one possesses, deploys, diminishes, feeds, or destroys directly affects one’s moral consciousness and ethical agency. Moreover, energy is capable, in Weil’s reading, of serving as an intermediary between one’s moral agency and the physical, embodied actions one undertakes.

This function as the intermediary or channel between the physical and the spiritual arises out of the fact that Weil’s concept of energy is closely related to her notion of will or attention: like these latter notions, energies, too, are to be considered as inherently erotic. As Weil explains it, “In a general way, everything that is desired is a source of energy, and energy is on the same level as desire.” While energy is a unified force in Weil’s thought, she distinguishes between two different manifestations of energy which correspond to the particular aspect of the human being each kind of energy serves. Vegetative (or vital) energy maintains the basic chemical and biological processes of life, while supplementary (or voluntary, sometimes animal) energy fuels the desire and the will, and allows the autonomous ego to pursue its many and varied ends. Both kinds of energy are devoted to the preservation and enlargement of human selfhood and autonomy, and thus both energies serve the ego and constitute obstacles for the process of decreative self-emptying. However, vegetative energy functions at the level of necessity; its object is the continuation of existence—an explicit telos only when survival

consciousness is always directed toward an object (which is then re-presented to consciousness as the phenomenon). It will become clear, however, that what I am calling intentionality in Weil’s thought also has a “thicker” sense, in that it has to do, not only with consciousness tending toward and representing objects, but also with the dynamic being of a subject possessed of consciousness. While this is arguably also the case for Husserl, it is a fortiori the case for Weil, who develops the link between intentionality and being in an important if idiosyncratic manner.

is directly threatened.\textsuperscript{247} Like the bodily matter it sustains, it is subject to the laws of necessity. Under ordinary circumstances, vegetative energy, which “is below the level of time,”\textsuperscript{248} is sufficient for meeting our basic biological and physiological needs, in which case we are governed and sustained primarily by supplementary energy, which feeds and maintains the desire for external objects that constitutes our egoist, falsely-substantial being. According to Weil, there is a “hunger for finality which constitutes the very being of every individual.”\textsuperscript{249} This hunger for purposiveness—a desire to fix upon, gain fulfillment through, and consume or instrumentalize objects of desire—is mediated through supplementary energy, which “allows thought to travel through stretches of time,”\textsuperscript{250} thereby striving for and achieving determined and finite goals over a particular span of time. Supplementary energy “sustains desire and the will,”\textsuperscript{251} and fuels the self’s attempts to locate its existence in the fulfillment of the purposes it pursues. According to Weil, however, these attempts are ultimately futile, since no purpose or end in the world offers the possibility of genuine fulfillment.\textsuperscript{252} Efforts directed toward attaining the objects of our desire—a friend, a lover, a career, a place, a virtue—will end in the appropriation or cannibalization—and hence the destruction—of that object. This is so whether supplementary energy is caught up in efforts of the will in acting, or in efforts of the intellect in representing objects to consciousness, since strictly speaking, both

\textsuperscript{247} Weil writes, “Existence is only an end from the point of view of the vegetative energy, which pursues its silent, underground course and only rises to the surface at the touch of the cold hand of fear” (\textit{Notebooks}, vol. 2, p. 495).

\textsuperscript{248} Weil, \textit{First and Last Notebooks}, 220.


\textsuperscript{250} Weil, \textit{First and Last Notebooks}, 220.

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{252} Weil explains that “It is impious to apply the notion of finality to phenomena of the sensible world… Necessity is the essence of the reality of the things of this world. In other words, their essence is a conditional one. Their essence lies in not being ends” (\textit{Notebooks}, vol. 2, 495-6). See also 549-50. As we saw in Ch. 1, this lack of finality in the sensible world is a result of Weil’s cosmology, in which only the good beyond the world (or the God who is absent from the world) can be a true end.
involve an illusory conceptualization of the object of desire, and both end necessarily in
the exploitation and consumption of that object. Under normal circumstances,
supplementary energy has a ready supply of objects on which to fix itself, since it is
continually occupied in attaining finite goods and objects which are within its reach and
capacities. Weil holds that it is impossible to behave ethically toward another human
being unless this native intentionality and grasping after ends is somehow stymied—at
the level of both the intellect and the will—and the illusion of the other’s status as object
of desire is somehow shattered.

In many important respects, Weil’s position appears to have much in common
with the Levinasian stance on ethics. Like Weil, Levinas attempts to expose and criticize
the myriad of strategies employed by the self—chief among them the representation
within consciousness that is implied in phenomenological concepts of intentionality—in
order to claim others as objects for its own ends. Also like Weil, Levinas seems to insist
upon the concrete, embodied, and irreducible face of the other as that which calls into
question the self’s stability, security, and existence, and makes manifest from the outset
the infinite obligation that the self owes to the other qua other. Writes Levinas,

[T]he face is chilled to the bone in its nakedness. It is a desolation. The
nakedness of the face is destitution and already supplication… But this
supplication is an obligation… [T]he face imposes on me and I cannot stay deaf
to its appeal, or forget it, what I mean is I cannot stop being responsible for its
desolation. Consciousness loses its first place. Thus, the presence of the face
signifies an irrefutable order—a commandment—that arrests the availability of
consciousness. Consciousness is challenged by the face.253

This Levinasian notion that the face of the other in its destitution commands an
immediate obligation and an unlimited responsibility sounds much like Weil’s twin ideas

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Press, 2003), 32.
that there is an absolute ethical obligation owed to each human being solely on the basis
of her existence as a human being, and that the fulfillment of this obligation is best
expressed in a self-abnegating responsibility for meeting her physical and spiritual needs
without delay and in a manner “as instinctive and immediate as it is for oneself to eat
when one is hungry.” In absolutizing the ethical stance and the ego’s loss of
sovereignty occasioned by the relation to the other, Levinas appears to draw near to the
radicality of Weil’s concept of decreation, which for her represents the only mode in
which a self can relate ethically to the other.

For Levinas and Weil alike, this obligation to the other requires for its fulfillment
a complete divestment of the intentionality and purposiveness which normally
characterize human beings’ relations with each other. As Levinas explains, “Subjectivity
is not for itself; it is… initially for another… It is a structure that in nowise resembles
the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object—to no matter what
object, be it a human object.” For Weil as well, desire and intentionality must be
uprooted from their object, or else the supplementary energy will continue to falsify,
instrumentalize, and consume the object, and the ego will maintain an illegitimate
relation to the object. This process of detachment is a difficult and painful one according
to both Levinas and Weil. In Weil’s thought, it requires that all supplementary energy be
drained in order that the vegetative energy should be forced to operate as the reserve, and
be diverted from its usual work of maintaining basic life function. “When the vegetative
energy is exposed to the attacks of circumstance and begins to be consumed, this energy
itself must tear itself away from the biological functions which it sustains and must

255 Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University
devote itself to God. This is spiritual death, which is also a physical operation. Man offers himself as food for God’s creatures.” For Weil, spiritual death—language that cannot help but call to mind both baptismal language of dying with Christ, and the Pauline claim that “to live is Christ, to die is gain”—is intimately and necessarily linked with the physical transformation of energy through which one human being enters into an ethical relationship with other human beings. The falsely substantial self becomes transmuted into the ethical relation itself.

As a concrete example, Weil writes of the transfer of energy that occurs between the physical and the spiritual and back again in the work done by agricultural laborers in an ideal situation. According to Weil, for these workers, it is the case that labor literally burns away the flesh, and that in a sense, their own flesh has been transformed into bread. Consecration makes this bread into the body of Christ. They eat it, and through digestion the flesh of Christ becomes their flesh. The cycle is completed… [We must] ask of God that he make our flesh into Christ’s flesh so that we might become nourishment for all those who are afflicted.

This transformation, in which the physical or vegetative energy normally employed to sustain one’s life is drained away into the life of the grain that one has worked to plant and harvest, is precisely the kind of operation which, according to Weil, permits the supplementary energy to be detached from finite ends and prevented from taking these ends and making them instruments for its own purposes. Only when this first transfer of energies has occurred can someone become capable of the next, ethical step; namely, the transmutation of the self (including corporeality) into a relational energy that provides nourishment for those who are afflicted. For Weil, then, the ethical relation demands

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256 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 223.
257 Weil, La Connaissance Surnaturelle, 228. Translation mine. Elsewhere, she writes that “if the work of a farm laborer makes me grow thin, my flesh truly becomes wheat. If this wheat is used for a eucharistic host, then my flesh becomes the flesh of Christ. Whoever labors with this intention is destined to become a saint.” La Connaissance Surnaturelle, 41-2. Translation mine.
more than merely the passive restraint manifested in a refusal to consume others. Rather, the truly ethical relation requires us to become ourselves vehicles or instruments for others, or—as Weil more radically expresses it—to give ourselves up as food for others. Alec Irwin calls this a “cannibalistic economy in which the substance of one body, expended as energy in work, passes over into other human selves and is incorporated by them.”

Weil’s cannibalistic economy, however, is meant to replace the ordinary cannibalistic economy that usually operates. Weil thus espouses a far-reaching (and for many, even an alarming) manner of being-for-the-other which calls into question any and all justifications offered by those who stop short of such a radical ethic.

Levinas, like Weil, is known for his own radical (sometimes controversial) ethic, which, like Weil’s, involves an unconditional being-for-the-other. Levinas, too, sees the disruption of complacent subjectivity by the other as the pre-requisite for an ethical orientation toward the other, and indeed, for the possibility of ethics at all. Curiously, Levinas employs the trope of eating in a way quite similar to Weil during his discussion of those things which human beings appropriate as nourishment, and which give rise to human enjoyment:

Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other…becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimanation. Hunger is need, is privation in the primal sense of the word, and thus precisely living from… Enjoyment is precisely this way the act nourishes itself with its own activity.

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259 He explains that the “unconditionality of being hostage [to the other] is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 117.
260 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 111. Italics the author’s. The translator notes that his rendering of the French “vivre de” in this passage is perhaps better translated as “living on”—a note with which I agree. Indeed, the connotation in this section suggests in places an almost vampiric “feeding on.” Cf. his discussion of hunger, which is “need or privation par excellence” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina
According to Levinas, this transmutation of the other into the same—a form of cannibalism—is what must be avoided if the ethical relationship is to become possible. Indeed, Levinas explains that the truly ethical relation is one that refuses such a transmutation and instead safeguards the infinite transcendence of the other considered as “the uncontainable, the nonthematizable.” For Levinas, the ethical relation disrupts subjectivity and interrupts the intentionality by which the subject ordinarily thematizes and appropriates the other for her own ends. Levinas claims that the transcendence of the other precludes the possibility of intentionality, because intentionality implies fulfillment or containment, and genuine transcendence cannot be circumscribed in this fashion.

Like Weil, Levinas describes this being-for-the-other in radical language which suggests the dissolution of the autonomous subject:

This relationship is a nearness that is a responsibility for the other. A relationship that obsesses, one that is an obsession for the other besieges me, to the point where he puts in question my for-me, my in-itself—to the point where he makes me a hostage… This responsibility goes to the point of fission, all the way to the e-nucleation of the ‘me’. And therein lies the subjectivity of the ‘me’. 

Levinas makes it plain that his ethical vision requires the ego to lose its sovereignty and itself when faced with the obligation to the other; indeed, for Levinas, there can be no sovereign ego which exists in time before the other makes known its demands. The normal state of affairs, in which the other is reflected in the consciousness of the self and

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Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 170-1. For Levinas, enjoyment—the self satisfying its hunger by consuming objects and converting them from Other into Same—is the primordial mode of [nonethical] subjectivity. While it is true that enjoyment for Levinas is not unequivocally negative—after all, only a subject genuinely attached to its enjoyments can experience renouncing them for the other as a true sacrifice—it is still the case that enjoyment is a mark of being embodied, “at home” in the world, and complacent with regard to self-enclosing, other-appropriating subjectivity. For a discussion of this ambiguity of hunger, enjoyment and embodiment, see Diane Perpich, “Sensible Subjects: Levinas and Irigaray on Incarnation and Ethics,” *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust and Kent Still (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 296-309.


Ibid.
thereby converted—cannibalized—into that which is the same, is wholly undone in the
Levinasian schema. However, Levinas—unlike Weil—retains a substantial conception
of subjectivity as a necessary feature of the ethical relation. Although the face of the
other disrupts subjectivity, the self is also ultimately called into being and given its
identity-in-responsibility by the face of the other. Indeed, while Levinas argues that, in
“the face of the obligation of the Other, the Ego is banished from…repose,”263 he goes on
to claim that the “Ego is through and through, in its very position, responsibility or
diacony, as in chapter 53 of Isaiah… The uniqueness of the Ego is that no one can
answer in my stead.”264 For Levinas, the ethical relation in fact brings subjectivity into
being and lays upon the self its unique, irreplaceable identity—an identity conceived as
responsibility for the other. To be sure, this identity is not an egoist desire to convert the
other into the same, but rather, the identification of the Ego with morality itself. As he
expresses it, “The ego is not just a being endowed with certain qualities called moral
which it would bear as a substance bears attributes, or which it would take on as
accidents in its becoming. Its exceptional uniqueness in the…passion of the self is the
incessant event of subjection to everything, or substitution.”265 For Levinas, the
subjectivity that is called into being by the unceasing obligation to the other is not
precisely the classic autonomous subjectivity of the Enlightenment, nor can it be
described as substantial being with attendant accidents.266 Because the other “who incites
this ethical movement of consciousness…includes a surplus that is inadequate to

263 Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 33.
264 Ibid. Isaiah 53 is, of course, the suffering servant/man of sorrows chapter.
265 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 117.
266 Levinas notes that the self which comes into being through its responsibility for the other is not the
classic self in “Western thought which unites subjectivity and substantiaity.” *Otherwise Than Being*, 114.
intentionality,"267 the self *perpetually* lacks the solidity of substantial being in the face of
the unceasing ethical obligation which disrupts its subjectivity.

Nevertheless, Levinas makes it clear that the ethical relation not only destabilizes
subjectivity, but also summons it into existence, and that the existence of “a certain
subjectivity,”268—however destabilized or passive—is a requisite element of the ethical
being-for-the-other. Levinas describes this persistent subjectivity as

a super-valuing [*surenchère*] of the uniqueness of the subject—this comes to
pass not in an excess of presence but in the passive exceeding that is more
passive than any passivity, the transcendence of the one who is *for* the other.
This signifies neither intentionality nor a property of the ‘me’ [*moi]*… It is, on
the contrary, as responsibility and in responsibility that the ‘me’ gains its
uniqueness… [S]ubjectivity, the psyche, is passively structured as for the
other.269

Levinas, while continuing to resist the notion of an intentional self, nonetheless insists
upon a form of subjectivity that retains both its uniqueness-in-responsibility and its status
as one component of a dialectical relation. While Levinas likely would oppose the use of
the term “dialectical”, suggesting as it does enclosure within an economy of horizoned
intentionality, his concomitant and trenchant opposition to any and all universalization of
the ethical relation270 leaves his thought open to criticism that the ethical self-accusation
is not as fully passive as he insists it is, and that this surrender of the self on behalf of the
other retains a trace of the voluntarist, object-oriented intentionality that characterizes

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269 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 158. Italic the author’s. It should be noted that Levinas’ use of the
lower-case “moi” (in distinction from the upper-case “Moi”) represents his claim made elsewhere that the
subject is always already in the accusative case, meaning that it always already stands accused and
convicted in the face of the other. See, for example, his discussion in “Language and Proximity,” *Collected
Than Being*, 110-112; 124.
270 See, for example, his criticism of the political apparatus (state, laws, etc.), which he calls “the source of
universality,” and which he claims “bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have
given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia” (Levinas, *Totality
and Infinity*, 300).
most human relationships. Indeed, as Levinas scholar Leslie Macavoy argues, the total unmaking of subjectivity and intentionality is not what Levinas intends for the self that is simultaneously displaced and summoned by the obligation to the other:

Levinas devotes considerable time to explaining the development of the interiority of the conscious subject who is concerned with its being. We cannot dispense with this subject, nor is it Levinas’s intention to suggest this… The significance of exteriority and its ethical hold on us would be completely effaced if interiority were eliminated. Levinas’ point is simply that interiority cannot be the whole story about subjectivity; if it were, ethics would never really be ethical because it would always be rooted ultimately in self-interest.271

Thus it appears that, despite the safeguards Levinas puts in place in order to rule out the possibility that the self somehow will recuperate its autonomous and substantial subjectivity in or after the encounter with the other, there still remains in the Levinasian ethic a trace of the will-to-be, even if this will-to-be is in fact a will-to-be-for-the-other. Although he wishes to claim for the ethical form of subjectivity an impassivity that “no longer belongs to the order where the alternative of activity and passivity retains its meaning,”272 his depiction of “for-the-other” in terms of self-sacrifice or self-exile exposes the persistent residue of intentional subjectivity that serves as one side of the dyadic ethical relation. For, without some form of subjectivity—however fragmentary or interrupted—the “tearing away” of self on behalf of the other lacks significance and meaning. Only if there is an actual self which must give up something of itself can such self-gift have any authentic ethical traction.273 Levinas, then, begins with a responsibility for the other which precedes all selfhood and subjectivity; indeed, selfhood and subjectivity cannot truly be said to exist until they are summoned into being by the face

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272 Levinas, Otherwise Than Being, 118.
273 Macavoy also makes this point when she observes that “Ethical responsibility as Levinas construes it must involve sacrifice if it is to have any significance. Sacrifice means taking from oneself and giving to another” (Macavoy, “The Other Side of Intentionality,” Addressing Levinas, 115).
of the other and the obligation to sacrifice that the face of the other commands. For Levinas, prior to the primordial, non-thematizable ethical relation with the other, there is properly speaking, no self, no consciousness, and no subjectivity.

In spite of the fact that Levinas himself cites Simone Weil’s notion of a tearing away of the body and soul in order to make them instruments of the divine, Weil’s theological ethics and anthropology move in precisely the opposite direction as Levinas’. Where Levinas begins with a non-subject who becomes a subject in and through his self-abnegating ethical encounter with the other, Weil begins with a subject—albeit a falsely substantial one—who becomes a non-subject in and through her self-abnegating encounter with the other. Both Levinas and Weil are asking—and attempting to answer—a similar question: namely, is there a way in which a genuinely ethical relation to the other can be had absent self-interest, appropriation of the other, or a cannibalizing intentionality that converts another subject into an instrument or object for one’s own subjectivity? For Levinas, the ethical structure he develops serves as the ground for his conception of subjectivity; ultimately, it cannot dispense with subjectivity. It may be the case that the subjectivity which arises out of the primordial, pre-reflexive experience of standing accused before the other is indeed a sacrificial, even expiatory subjectivity that lies “beyond being”—an “individuation or superindividuation of the ego which consists in being in itself, in its skin, without sharing the conatus essendi of all beings which are beings in themselves.” Yet, because the Levinasian ethical relation has as its end, not

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274 In speaking of the absolute nature of the responsibility of being for the other, Levinas writes, “There, a tearing away [arrachement] and the excess of a tearing away is expressed, whose violence Simone Weil accurately measured when she wrote, ‘Father… tear this body and this soul from me…to make of these your things, and let nothing remain of me, eternally, but this tearing away itself’” (Levinas, God, Death and Time, 159). Levinas also cites it in Otherwise Than Being, note 3, 198. The Weil citation is from Waiting for God.

275 Levinas, Otherwise Than Being, 118.
the total dissolution of subjectivity—a dissolution which would preclude within the Levinasian structure all possibility of ethical self-sacrifice or the bearing of another’s sufferings—but rather, the development of a subjectivity that is summoned into existence in and through the ethical relation, it is difficult to see how he avoids all possibility of a lingering *conatus essendi*. In aiming for a new, ethical form of subjectivity which resists the conversion of other into same, Levinas still requires a “sameness without which [his] philosophy of radical alterity could find no expression, no ground, and no coherence.”²⁷⁶

In order for the face of the other to break through self-seeking interiority and be experienced as a pre-subjective and pre-originary ethical responsibility, it must in some fashion—however minimally—be identifiable as something which has a claim upon one. This identifiability mandates the continued presence of the same—that is, of a recuperated subjectivity which retains at least the possibility of a return to egoism.

Levinas is not unaware of the tension in his thought that arises from his effort to maintain “the preservation of the ego in transcendence;”²⁷⁷ indeed, in developing his ethic, he “wants to preserve both the radical alterity of the other and the independence of the I in this relation that is a nonrelation.”²⁷⁸ He insists that this double preservation is possible when the face-to-face encounter with the other is understood as immediate—that is, as something other than phenomenon or representation, and yet also as that which comes between the subject and the other.²⁷⁹ For Levinas, contact—or mediation—“does not represent the primordial mode of the immediate. Contact is already a thematization


²⁷⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other, and Other Essays*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 77. Levinas asks “How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?” (ibid.).

²⁷⁸ Chanter, *Time, Death and the Feminine*, 181.

²⁷⁹ Levinas calls the immediate “the interpellation and, if we may speak thus, the imperative of language” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52).
and a reference to a horizon. The immediate is the face-to-face." Levinas resists all structures of mediation, seeing in such structures the dangerous tendency toward intentionality and toward the representation and appropriation of the other by the subject. Yet even the radical immediacy of the Levinasian ethical relation cannot categorically do without mediation and contact. These mediatory structures make an appearance in Levinas’ thought in his reflections on the feminine, the dwelling, paternity and filiation. Levinas opposes mediation in order to purify the ethical relation of grasping intentionality and the potential for appropriative or violating representation, yet the condition for the possibility of this purely ethical relation in fact simultaneously depends upon and elides the feminine body and maternal self-gift. We will now turn to a discussion of the problems that this elision raises for ethics, a possible resolution offered by a Weilian structure of relational, incarnate, decreated being, and the manner in which Weil’s relational anthropology operates as an ally of Irigaray’s contemporary feminist attempt to reconsider the body and mediation as important aspects of a just and relational ethic.

III. Weil and Irigaray: Incarnation, Mediation, and the Relational Self

Weil shares with both Levinas and Luce Irigaray the critique of the classic Cartesian subject and the effort to destabilize and reconfigure traditional elements of subjectivity along ethical, relational lines. All three contest the notion that the object of consciousness functions as a “given,” such that the object is represented in consciousness as something (or someone) capable of being mastered or grasped via the creative spontaneity of intentionality. Levinas names the outcome of such intentional

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280 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.
representation intelligibility, which he describes as “a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought… [T]he object’s resistance as an exterior being vanishes. This mastery is total…; it is accomplished as the giving of meaning.” Irigaray identifies the same problem when she decries the existence of a “subject that already knows its objects and controls its relations with the world and with others. Already closed to any initiation. Already solipsistic. In charge of a world it enjoys only through possession.” Weil, too, finds fault with the subject which operates on the basis of a totalizing appropriation of others, although she expresses it somewhat differently:

> For each man, himself is I and all others are the others. I, that is to say, the centre of the world; that central position is represented in space by perspective. The others, that is to say those portions of the universe more or less near to I, are for the most part of no importance… Except the cases where one human being is brutally subjected to another, who deprives him for a time of the power of thinking in the first person, everyone disposes of others as he disposes of inert things, either in fact, if he has the power, or in thought.

Like Levinas and Irigay, Weil troubles the serene waters of reflective consciousness and its native tendency to grasp, colonize, and discard—both in reality and in thought alone—the other who is no more than an inert thing, an object given to the self for its own enjoyment and use. Yet the path Weil follows in arresting this cannibalizing self and in developing an ethic that is genuinely relational diverges from Levinas and instead converges upon the path of incarnational ethics described by Irigaray. Weil offers a middle way, as it were, between on the one side a Levinasian ethic which ultimately cannot affirm or validate the significance of the incarnational particularity and concrete

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281 Ibid., 124.
embodiment of the other in and for herself, and on the other side an Irigarayan ethic in which the very concrete, embodied particularity of the other resists a more universal relationality and the categorization or evaluation of different kinds of physical contact.284

Levinas, suspicious of the role played by love and enjoyment in intentional consciousness, eschews the erotic, defining it as a non-ethical, “supremely non-public” relationship that can never transcend a basic form of “dual egoism.”285 This mutual immersion—an obstruction to the transcendence of the authentically ethical relationship—is inimical to the ethical for Levinas largely on account of its absorption in and dependence upon the concrete and particularized body. Despite the occasional, limited affirmation of the body (e.g. in the context of labor and time), Levinas ultimately considers the body (along with its sensuous, material needs) as something which must be transcended in order to leave the realm of finite material needs and enter into the ethical realm of infinite Desire for the absolutely other: “[I]n need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one’s teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me.”286 According to Irigaray, Levinas’ mistrust of the sensual and the incarnate, and his interpretation of the feminine as the site of incarnate sensuality, means that the feminine becomes something that precedes and functions outside of the genuinely ethical. For Irigaray, this renders his treatment of the embodied encounter exceedingly problematic:

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284 As Diane Perpich observes, one possible problem with Irigaray’s sexual ethics is that “the caress which gives the subject to itself, showing it its own contours, always has the simultaneous possibility of turning the subject into a thing, treating it as mere matter or as a mere body” (Perpich, “Sensible Subjects,” Addressing Levinas, 307). That is, it is difficult—as we will see—to locate within Irigaray’s ethics a principle by which touch can be judged as subject-constituting or subject-destroying; touch itself can move in either direction.
285 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 265-6.
286 Ibid., 117.
If the male lover needs to prove himself in sensual pleasure, he does so in order to sink down into the other of himself. To put down the night side of himself, which he covers up in the reasonable habitat of his life and from which he gains, as he emerges, the form of his highest ascension. The body of the beloved [female], which has been approached through caresses, is abandoned on the threshold of the nuptials. There is no union. The seduction of the beloved woman serves as a bridge between the Father and the son. Through her, who is only an aspect of himself, the male lover goes beyond love and pleasure toward the ethical.  

Irigaray here criticizes Levinas for his attempt to move beyond immanence and mediation into the transcendent ethical relation with the other by making use of and then discarding the term of mediation, namely, the embodied feminine. Indeed, Tina Chanter, echoing Irigaray, observes that “The transcendence of the ethical relation as Levinas presents it occurs on the basis of and at the expense of the feminine, which serves as the ground and condition of ethics, but which is itself excluded from the ethical.” The fecundity of the caress serves merely as the incarnate prelude to the truly ethical relation—that of paternity, which images the ethical relation a fortiori, since “it is a relationship with an absolute other in which the I survives. The I survives because paternity is also a relationship with the same.” For Levinas, then, the particularity of bodies—especially the feminine body—both precedes and precludes the possibility of the authentic ethical relation, which takes place only in the context of the encounter with the “invisible” and absolute other, “with what is not given.” In other words, the ethical encounter does not, in the end, take place between two bodies, and the encounter with the feminine is an encounter with the embodied. Levinas admits that “the encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child come to pass from beyond the

288 Chanter, Time, Death and the Feminine, 53.
290 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 34.
possible.”\textsuperscript{291} The child—nearly always referred to by Levinas as “the son”—serves as “the male lover’s means of return to himself outside himself[,] the son closes the circle.”\textsuperscript{292} In structuring the ethical relation thusly, the Levinasian concept of paternity as the preeminent and primordial ethical relation is grounded in the classically patriarchal structure of masculine identity and descent, passed down from father to son and excluding the body, which becomes the preserve of the feminine.\textsuperscript{293}

Levinas’ apprehension concerning the potential dangers of mediation and incarnation runs throughout his work. Even the face of the other is understood, not as an incarnate, particular presence, but rather, as a voice which, in its absolute alterity, lacks concrete particularity: “A face is not an appearance or sign of some reality, which would be personal like it is, but dissimulated or expressed by the physiognomy, and which would present itself as an invisible theme… In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying.”\textsuperscript{294} It is not the concrete embodied, particular other who is irreplaceable according to Levinas, but rather the subject, whose responsibility for the other is such that no one else can fulfill it. Levinas safeguards the absolute alterity of the other and the categorical nature of the subject’s responsibility for the other by refusing incarnation and mediation in the ethical relation (instead shifting mediation to the non-ethical relation with the feminine other), and insisting upon the immediacy of the ethical relation. In so doing, he makes it difficult to retain on the one hand the genuine

\textsuperscript{291} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 267.
\textsuperscript{293} Much has been written (beyond the scope of this chapter) about paternity, the feminine, and ethics in Levinas, particularly by feminists who criticize his insistence that through paternal “election,” in which the father is always already responsible for the son who is simultaneously himself and other than himself, the father discovers his own subjectivity. This very neatly excises the role played by the mother, who is reduced in the Levinasian schema to enclosing corporeality without access to or the capacity for transcendence.
\textsuperscript{294} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise Than Being}, 93-4.
particularity of the other for whom one has an infinite responsibility, and on the other hand, a real means by which the ethical movement of self-abnegation and self-emptying on behalf of the other might actually be offered to the other.

For Irigaray and Weil alike, this self-emptying on behalf of the other cannot take place without the body. Ethical self-gift in both thinkers operates in terms of a non-acting action (to use Weil’s term) through which the self gives place to the other in a non-intentional, incarnational, and primordial generosity. While for Irigaray this ethical movement is imaged most profoundly in the physical caress of the sexual experience, Weil more broadly considers it in terms of a mediation through which divine love enters into the other by means of contact from the emptied self. Despite this difference, however, Irigaray and Weil share the notion that ethics is only possible when the enclosed, intentional subject opens itself up to the other, and in so doing, is divested of its grasping egoism and becomes a conduit for the grace which is mediated by the action of the open, emptied subject. Irigaray, in her description of the life of the mystic, writes that “All is…waiting, unpremeditated abandon. Refusal of any willed, concerted activity that could stand in the path of ‘grace.’ Expectant expectancy, absence of project and projections.”

This openness and attitude of non-teleological expectancy is precisely what permits the mystic to enter into the authentically ethical relation with the other—a relation that functions outside the cannibalistic economy of exchange, and entails a profligate “expenditure without accountability” on behalf of the other. This unconditional self-gift is not given to an eminently interchangeable (and so, in some sense, abstract) other, but rather, to a concretely embodied other by means of a touch.

296 Ibid., 195.
“that seeks out and affirms otherness while protecting it.” It is not immediacy which acts to preserve the radical alterity of the other; on the contrary, otherness can be fully protected only when it is acknowledged and affirmed through the loving, attentive transmission of grace, mediated via touch.

For Weil, too, contact with the other stands at the center of her understanding of the ethical relation. Eric Springsted emphasizes this incarnational thrust:

One of the chief hallmarks of Weil’s religious thought is that spiritual life cannot be separated from material and intellectual life; indeed, it must be incarnated. This is exactly what happens when obligations are brought into play, for there, whatever fullness of attention a man might possess must be brought to bear on the needs of his neighbors and his faith must become effective in action. In this he imitates the Mediator, for his own love for God is acted out in meeting the needs of others.

Weil’s concept of embodied mediation frequently receives determination in her discussions of energy transfer, and the conversion of the self’s false substantiality into nourishment for others. In this way, our very bodies become the means by which the ethical relation with the other is brought into being, and by which the egoist self is decreated, thereby conveying vital energy and existence into the depleted and afflicted other. As Weil explains in a gloss on the parable of the Good Samaritan, “Christ taught us that the supernatural love of our neighbor is the exchange of compassion and gratitude which happens in a flash between two beings, one possessing and the other deprived of human personality.” She goes on to say that it is the loving, active attention of the Samaritan—an attention offered without any desire for remuneration—which simultaneously preserves and sustains the particular humanity of the wounded man, and depletes and decreatively empties the substantial self of the Good Samaritan:

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298 Springsted, *Christus Mediator*, 226.
The actions that follow are just the automatic effect of this moment of attention. The attention is creative. But at the moment when it is engaged it is a renunciation. This is true, at least, if it is pure. The man accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him. Still more, to desire the existence of the other is to transport himself into him by sympathy, and, as a result, to have a share in the state of inert matter which is his.299

This mediating, attentive action, through which an originally existing (albeit false) self is depleted of its sustaining energy and that energy is then transferred to another, may appear to have something in common with the Levinasian notion of substitution, in which the self expiates for and on behalf of the other. Yet Levinas resists Weil’s incarnate mediation, insisting that “substitution is not transubstantiation. It is not a question of entering into another substance and establishing oneself in it. Substitution remains a relationship with another, and as such it stays in discontinuity.”300 For both Weil and Irigaray, however, the Levinasian concept of substitution problematizes the possibility of an authentic ethical relationship, precisely because his desire to safeguard radical alterity qua alterity leads him to insist upon a discontinuity which simultaneously permits the partial reconstitution of a dangerous autonomous subjectivity, while disallowing concrete, embodied means by which a subject truly can enter into and become the ethical relation considered as a dynamic conduit of energy. Like Levinas, Weil understands that the grasping ego is an obstacle that must be got rid of if the ethical relation is to come into being. Moreover, both Weil and Levinas acknowledge that the unseating of the ego is a matter of intense and often painful difficulty. Yet it is worth noting that, when Weil writes of her desire to allow God’s grace to be mediated to others through her body, she asks God to “rend this body and soul away from me to make them into things for your

300 Levinas, God, Death and Time, 186.
use, and let nothing remain of me… except this rending itself.”

The falsely substantial self becomes the “rending itself;” the body-self—like matter—is not destroyed and reconstituted, but rather, transubstantiated, via energy, “into Christ’s substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment.”

In Weil’s incarnational—one might even say sacramental—vision of substitution, the decreated self, always already relational within the network of necessity—becomes the redeemed, embodied relation between the divine and the other, and the source of attentive, ethical action to and for the other.

Weil shares with both Irigaray and Levinas the understanding that, in order to break out of enclosed subjectivity and instantiate an authentically ethical relation with the other, one must disrupt intentional consciousness. Yet, because Irigaray and Weil both see this disruption in terms of a self-gift arising out of an incarnate non-acting action, their embodied concept of self-abnegation for the other permits them to conceptualize it as fully ethical, rather than insufficiently so, as in Levinas. Moreover, the account of subjectivity offered by Weil and Irigaray moves from an enclosed, spuriously substantial subject, through a moment of free consent to openness and vulnerability and attentive action on behalf of the other, to end finally in a decreated non-subject (in the case of Weil) or a fully open self which, through love, respects and yet merges into the other (in the case of Irigaray). Levinas, however, begins his account of the self with an as-yet non-existent subject who, without any capacity to choose, comes into being already accused by and hostage to the other. It is through this unavoidable responsibility for the other that the pre-ethical non-subject realizes his subjectivity. Irigaray resists this description in

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301 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 244.
302 Ibid., 243.
which the “hostile freedom” of the becoming subject is “dominate[d]” by the obligation to be for-the-other. Instead, she calls for an embodied ethical relation by means of which “every subject loses its mastery and method” and hears a “call to a more distant future that is offered by and to the other in the abandonment of self…thanks to an intimacy that keeps unfolding itself more and more, opening and reopening the pathway to the mystery of the other.”

Like Irigaray, Weil sees the ethical obligation to the other as something which, when fulfilled, empties and opens the self, transforming the decreated self into relational non-being, and transmuting flesh into food for those who are hungry. The ethical relation is not, as with Levinas, an always-already which “once and for all” charges the subject with an absolute responsibility for the absolutely other. Rather, it is a relation with an actual, embodied other which must be entered into concretely, repeatedly, and at great cost to the grasping, egoist subject. Indeed, the obligation to the other must be practiced attentively, for it can easily be overlooked, denied, or misconstrued. Above all, for Irigaray and Weil alike, this practice cannot be practiced abstractly. Weil wonders, “How does one learn to read obligations? In the same way as one learns to read, essentially through the attention, the latter being helped by exercises in which the body takes part. Every time one performs an obligation one makes progress in this art, provided this performance be accompanied by genuine attention.”

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304 Ibid.
305 Ibid., 189
CHAPTER 3:
AN ETERNAL OBLIGATION:
THE POLITICO-ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RELATIONAL SELF

In mystical religions, the individual for whom the [charitable] sacrifice is made is regarded in the final analysis as unimportant and exchangeable; his individual value is negated. One’s ‘neighbor’ is simply a person whom one happens to encounter along the way; he has significance only because of his need and his solicitation. This results in a distinctively mystical flight from the world which takes the form of a non-specific and loving self-surrender, not for the sake of the man but for the sake of the surrender itself.\textsuperscript{307}

I. Mysticism, *Askesis*, and Social Justice

This Weberian description of mysticism, with its notion of a world-denying desire for self-abnegation on behalf of another—any other will do—is not without an element of accuracy. And in fact, the form of mysticism articulated and espoused by Simone Weil undoubtedly possesses at least Weber’s hallmark of “loving self-surrender.” Indeed, one might argue that this notion of loving self-surrender—both on the part of God in creation and on the cross, and on the part of humans who attempt to imitate, in love and obedience, God’s act of renunciation—serves as the very center of Weil’s thought. Yet for Weil, this loving, self-surrendering movement at the heart of mysticism consists, not in what Weber calls a “mystical flight from the world,” but on the contrary, in an increased and ever-increasing capacity for radical engagement with the world.\textsuperscript{308}


\textsuperscript{308} This observation has been made by several other scholars in recent years, perhaps most recently by Patrick Patterson and Lawrence E. Schmidt in their essay “The Christian Materialism of Simone Weil,” in
unmaking or surrendering of the self—a process Weil terms “decreation”—permits one to encounter the neighbor as a particular human being in a particular context, and not merely as an interchangeable occasion for one’s own self-sacrifice.

On a superficial reading of Weil, it would be easy to dismiss her thought as an obvious exemplification of Weber’s description of the socio-political dynamics of mysticism. Her universalistic suspicion of the particular, her emphasis on nurturing within the self an impersonal perspective, her somewhat Kantian “formalization” of the objects of desire, and her insistence that the world operates according to the mechanical rule of Necessity all lend credence to the view that Weil’s thought suffers from a kind of mystical rationalization of human relationality. To the extent that Weil’s mysticism has socio-political implications, it is all too tempting to construe such implications as a mandate for the withdrawal of the “true” self to a transcendent realm beyond the contingencies of human social reality, or alternatively, as an attempt to baptize certain modern processes of dehumanization and instrumentalization by imbuing them with a new spiritual rationale. While it is true that Weil’s insistent focus on the impersonal structure of the world sometimes appears to be a kind of enshrinement of Necessity, it is important to see that, for Weil, the apparent impersonality that marks the process of decreation in fact serves as the means for breaking through the truly destructive impersonality of the autonomous ego.

It is my contention in this chapter that Weil’s understanding of mystical self-surrender is characterized by a deepened and intensified purification of the self’s relations with the world and with other human beings. This purification has important ethical and

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political ramifications, of which the most significant is the newfound capacity of the self to engage justly and ethically with the other, both at the level of interpersonal interaction and at the broader socio-political level, rather than succumbing to the inertia of injustice that functions as the engine relentlessly propelling the socio-political machine along in its grooved and only superficially varying iterations. Indeed, even the inexorability of the socio-political machine may be redeemed, in a certain limited sense, by the just political activities of those individuals who have experienced decreation. In this chapter, I shall show that, precisely at the moment when the self no longer serves as a kind of “occupied zone” governed by the grasping, imagination-fueled ego, the newly-surrendered self becomes capable of behaving ethically, humanely, and justly toward the other, even in the midst of social and political structures that lend themselves almost ineluctably to injustice, oppression, and dehumanization.

In order to support this argument, I intend to examine the distinction Weil makes between natural justice and supernatural—or harmonic—justice, paying particular attention to her notion of harmony as a form of equality that respects difference, and identity as a form of equality that elides difference. It will be important here to note Weil’s willingness to allow a certain kind of legitimacy to accrue to those forms of natural justice that appear (or can be made to appear via legal structures) within the socio-political sphere; while natural justice and supernatural justice are of different orders and hence cannot be thought of as flowing back and forth along a continuum of justice, the presence of supernatural justice nevertheless affects and even (to a limited extent) makes possible the existence and efficacy of political justice. The distinction between natural and supernatural justice remains an important one, however, in part because it
hinges upon the process of decreation. Decreation—the radical mystical operation by which the ordinary, “cannibalizing” structures of selfhood are dismantled—is the only means by which the self proves capable of exercising supernatural justice, and recognizing other human beings as anything other than obstacles in the path or instruments to be used. It will be my task to strengthen this point by considering what I see to be one of the most serious objections to Weil’s program for decreation: the critique that sees in decreation a masochistic violence which threatens the self’s political agency. I shall reflect on this objection in the context of an extended interlocution with feminist philosophical theologian Catherine Keller, paying heed in particular to Keller’s theological anthropology as a resource for reinterpreting and extending Weil’s own anthropology. It is my belief that such a juxtaposition will aid in reading Weil less reductively, and with a clearer eye to the possibilities presented by decreation for ethical and political engagement with the other. In the course of an examination of Weil’s definitions of justice and injustice, I hope to build upon the discussions of cosmology and anthropology in the preceding chapters in order to show how the decreative process culminates, not in the isolation or world-fleeing independence of the hermit-recluse, but rather, in a kind of relational mysticism which obliges the mystic to extend love and attention to her neighbor as a particular, concrete individual in the world.

II. Relationality and Decreation

As we observed in the first chapter, Weil holds that the ordering of the world according to blind, brute necessity and the ordering of the world according to divine providence are obverse sides of the same fundamental reality. Weil explains that, even
though the state of one’s soul and one’s concomitant epistemological perspective may preclude a clear understanding of the manner in which the matrix of the universe manifests the hidden workings of providence, the plain fact of this manifestation remains unchanged, and the location of the human being within this matrix remains a given. In a discussion meant to refute facile, superstitious depictions of providence, Weil writes, “Divine Providence is not a disturbing influence, an anomaly in the ordering of the world; it is itself the order of the world; or rather it is the regulating principle of this universe. It is eternal Wisdom, unique, spread across the whole universe in a sovereign network of relations.”

Once a human being has come to see that the brute force of necessity, with its seemingly mechanical relations, is merely the observable, often merciless face of the hidden providential order of the universe, her own already relational status within this order can be redeemed, and made to function purely and transparently, rather than mechanically and crushingly. All human beings are embedded in this sovereign network of relations, whether or not they realize it, and as we have come to understand it in the preceding chapters, this network of relations is not made up of a series of accidental connections linking wholly distinct substantial entities, but rather, serves as the dynamic constitutive principle through which the entities in the universe derive their existence and by means of which they can be said to be.

To claim as I have in the second chapter that the self is constituted by its relationality is to gesture toward the importance of decreation in Weil’s thought; it is, after all, through the kenotic decreative process that the self’s true relational status is fully realized. As a consequence of the kenotic understanding of God elaborated in the first chapter, along with Weil’s belief that humans have an obligation to imitate God’s

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own kenosis, Weil’s conception of the human being departs from more conventional versions of philosophical anthropology. Despite a lifelong preoccupation with the role and the limits of the will, for Weil, human personhood is best understood, not in terms of an agency analogous to the divine power and substantiality, but rather in terms of a self-effacement analogous to God’s kenotic movement of withdrawal, self-surrender, and passivity. If we as human beings are to imitate God—and Weil thinks we must—then we must be careful to imitate not the divine power, but rather the divine renunciation of power. Because God’s self-renunciation in the act of creation is recapitulated and made more concrete in Christ’s incarnation and crucifixion, it is to Christ we must look for the perfect paradigm of just self-abnegation. This self-abnegation is not merely a passive refusal of one’s own substantiality or will to power; rather, it is a just self-abnegation because it is undergone so that someone else’s bodily and spiritual needs might be met, and so that someone other than the self might be recognized as a human being who is worthy of dignity and love.\textsuperscript{310} As Lucy Bregman interprets Weil on this point, “God knows pain and self-extinction before we do; we should aspire to God’s own denial of selfhood.”\textsuperscript{311} To attempt the reverse is to reinforce the imaginative illusion of self-control and to deny the preeminent relationality that in fact “constitutes” the human self, even as the self remains enmeshed in the bonds of relationality that make up the fabric of the cosmos.

It is this piece of Weil’s cosmological framework that allows for harmonization of the apparent tension between her claim on the one hand that the ‘I’ has the status of non-

\textsuperscript{310} Cf. Springsted, \textit{Christus Mediator}, 115: “In short, [the human] ability to receive good, as spiritual beings, consists in their ability to renounce themselves, like Christ, so that others may live.”

being and must emerge from non-being via love,\textsuperscript{312} and her claim on the other that the self possesses—albeit illicitly—the status of being, and must restore this being to God via the decreative process. According to Weil, the self is non-being insofar as it is not a perduiring substance that acts and wills; it has no essence or substantiality, and therefore it cannot be said to exist or to have being. Nevertheless, it is the case that a self does exist insofar as it possesses not being, but rather the limited capacity to orient itself toward or away from something, and to act according to this orientation. As Weil expresses it in her thesis on Descartes, “Je peux, donc je suis.”\textsuperscript{313} This nominal agency—the power to turn one’s eyes in this or that direction—is the mark of creatureliness, and Weil asserts that it ought to be employed in orienting the self toward God and toward others in order that the self and its desires might be forgotten and—ideally—demolished.

The only residue of substantiality still present in Weil’s revised conception of the soul—the only genuine power which the soul possesses for itself—is this minimal freedom to accept or renounce its created existence.\textsuperscript{314} To call this power “free will” is perhaps even to overstate the efficaciousness of its agency; whereas a will is a disposition to \textit{act} in a certain manner, the only act which properly belongs to this freedom is its own self-abolition. The freedom of the soul, in refusing to relinquish its created existence, manifests itself as ego, “I”, or self. In deciding to relinquish its created existence, however, it manifests itself instead as consent or obedience, a decision which Weil characterizes variously as “supernatural” or “outside the world,” since consenting to

\textsuperscript{312} Weil, “New York Notebook,” \textit{First and Last Notebooks}, 97.
\textsuperscript{314} Indeed, the school of Weil interpretation represented by Peter Winch goes so far as to deny categorically any link to or residue of a substance-based philosophical anthropology in Weil’s thought. Winch observes that, for Weil, the proper noun ‘I’ merely conveys “the grammatical subject of the activity-verb; it does not refer to an entity which happens to perform this activity and which might do other things as well.” Winch, \textit{Simone Weil: The Just Balance} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12. On this point, I concur with Winch’s reading of Weil.
decreation in this manner requires the aid of grace (even if one is unaware of the action of grace in one’s being). According to Weil, “[w]e possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say ‘I’. That is what we have to give to God—in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish—only the destruction of the ‘I’.”315 Significantly, though, neither of these uses of freedom is conceived of or depicted in terms of substantial independence; on the contrary, they can be understood only in terms of the relations of dependence in which their being is maintained. If an individual’s freedom is exercised in opting to remain a self, then that individual continues (albeit unawares) to function as a site for the free interplay of the forces of necessity. If the individual instead consents freely to the process of decreation, then she retains the relational status she possessed prior to decreation, but with one vital transmutation: the impure, grasping, power-driven relationality of her former situation is transformed into a transparent, egoless relationality. As Weil explains,

Those men who disregard the true good disobey God in the sense that they don’t obey him as a thinking creature ought to do, with the consent of the mind. But their bodies and souls are entirely subject to the laws of the mechanisms that rule in sovereign fashion over physical and psychical matter. The physical and psychical matter in them obeys perfectly; they are perfectly obedient insofar as they are matter, and they are not anything else, if they do not possess nor have any desire for the supernatural light which alone raises man above matter.316

This doubled structure of necessity underscores the extent to which the human being is itself nothing other than a relation—a channel through which force passes. Whether created—choosing continued existence—or decreated—allowing itself to be unmade—the soul is related inescapably to the structures which interpenetrate it.

III. Justice, Relationality, and Harmony

According to Weil, it is precisely this relational structure of the cosmos and of human existence which simultaneously permits and precludes the possibility of justice in the world. Because human beings “are subjects only by perpetual contact with an object,” their relational subjectivity can come into being either by means of an oppressive or instrumentalizing contact with objects, or by means of a just, ethical contact with those objects. The latter, Weil holds, is possible only for humans who have been denuded of their substantial existence via decreation, since it is only these human beings who have become aware of their status as nothing. However, these human beings are hardly thick on the ground in contemporary society. Indeed, in exegeting a passage from the *Phaedo* which makes death a prerequisite for the attainment of wisdom and justice, Weil states, “If justice demands that during this life one be naked and dead, it is evident that this justice is impossible to human nature, and is supernatural.” Because of the relational intentionality that is a characteristic, both of the collectivities in which humans participate and which are themselves components of the broader mechanism of necessity, and of the interpersonal relationality that governs the quotidian interactions between human individuals, Weil holds that true justice is something that lies outside the reach of many individuals and nearly all societies.

Weil’s treatment of collectivities—broadly considered, any collection or conglomerate of humans who refer to themselves in the first person plural—will be examined at greater length in the fifth chapter. It will suffice here to note that she has

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very little to say in favor of collectivities, and she spares no groups her judgement, whether they be nations, organized religions, or labor movements. For Weil, collectivities are microcosms of the macrocosmic and unredeemed necessity; like necessity, which “is a pure concatenation of conditions” that subjects every human individual “to the weight of the entire universe,” collectivities also subordinate the human individual to a web of instrumentalizing connections, and place her in bondage to illusion and idolatry. To belong to a collective is a form of unconscious slavery which, for Weil, renders an individual the captive of arbitrary public opinions. Participation in a collectivity makes it nearly impossible to distinguish individuals in their particularity, since what becomes crucially important is the mechanism by which individuals are taken up into the collectivity, and the means by which they are held fast within it. Thus, for example, even democracy, when it has been enshrined as a “cause” and turned into a collectivity which inspires partisanship and worshipful or passionate adherence, can erase the individuality and autonomy of its participants, and shroud their particularity in an ersatz form of equality—that is, in totality. That this can occur despite democracy’s emphasis on the autonomy and agency of the individual is due in large part to the fact that a collectivity encourages in its participants a false sense of belonging to something that is transcendent, even absolute. Explains Weil, “The error is due to the clothes. It is the social which throws the color of the absolute over the relative.”

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320 “…one does not realize to what degree one is the slave of social influences. By its very nature this slavery is almost always unconscious, and at those moments when it appears to the consciousness there is always the resource of lying to oneself in order to veil it” (Weil, “God in Plato” *Intimations of Christianity*, 87).
directed toward the good. Moreover, the collectivity creates in participating human beings an artificial impression of the equality of individuals, when in reality it offers at best only a totalizing sameness that punishes differentiation and autonomy. As Weil observes, “The power of the social element. Agreement between several men brings with it a feeling of reality. It brings with it also a sense of duty. Divergence, where this agreement is concerned, appears as a sin… The state of conformity is an imitation of grace.”322 To be absorbed in a collectivity is to attach one’s energy and desires to a spurious or unworthy object, whether that object be patriotism, an artificial consensus, or piety. In all cases, justice for the individual is nearly impossible to achieve within a collectivity, since the concrete particularity of each human being, with all her needs and obligations, fades away into nothing when it is viewed against the broad, overmastering horizon of allegiance to a perceived collective duty or desire. In the context of the collectivity, the human individual is an object to be made use of or discarded as needed in the course of each person’s attainment of subjectivity.

A similar problem exists at the level of one-to-one interaction. It is extremely rare for human beings to develop their subjectivity by means of just and ethical contact with others, even when it is a question of two individuals interacting with each other rather than the relationships among many people in a collectivity. This is so on account of the human drive to occupy first place, and to exercise power over others. In support of this claim, Weil on more than one occasion cites Thucydides, who describes in *The Peloponnesian War* the encounter between the powerful Athenians and the weak Melians. When the beleaguered Melians sue for justice from the Athenians, they receive this reply: “The human mind being made as it is, the justice of a matter is examined only

322 Ibid., 394.
if there is an equal necessity on both sides. Contrarily, if one is strong and the other weak, what is possible is accomplished by the first and accepted by the second… Of the gods we believe, as of man, we certainly know, that it is a necessary law of their nature to rule wherever they can. It is extraordinarily difficult for someone in a position of strength to renounce that position voluntarily so as to preserve the autonomy of one who holds a weaker position, and to bring into being the kind of equilibrium that exists between two equals and that signals the presence of justice. This means that in the normal course of events, all interpersonal relationships (except those very rare ones in which both parties are already truly equal in terms of status and power) are marked by injustice and by a lack of ethical action. This is the case for relationships between two individuals who love each other just as much as for two individuals who are strangers, or who are openly hostile toward each other. In the latter instances—as with, for example, the Athenians and the Melians—exploitation and injustice are perhaps more immediately recognizable, since they are consequences of the “unlimited character of the race for power considered as relationship between men.” Yet even loving relationships cannot escape this race for power; they merely hide its vicious character beneath the veils of convention and language. Alec Irwin, in insisting upon the “cannibalistic” character of love-relationships, interprets and develops Weil’s thought on this point:

The exploitative, assimilative mode of relationship flows inevitably from the configuration of the self. Psychological like physical hunger is an expression less of individuality than of a trans-personal necessity. We need energy (psychic and physical) to live. We obtain that energy from the most convenient source. Approaching another human being we may

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claim to love and respect, we are in reality vampires in search of a meal. “We love someone,” Weil writes, “that is to say, we drink his blood.”

If even the relationship between two individuals who love each other is tainted by injustice and unethical acquisitiveness, then what hope have we that justice ever can exist, either on the interpersonal or the social plane?

Weil does not provide an optimistic answer to such a question; nevertheless, she holds that justice can and does exist, even within collectivities. Moreover, she devotes a great deal of attention (from her earliest writings to her last major work, The Need for Roots) to the practical reforms—legal, political, economic, pedagogical, and spiritual—that would be required in order to make justice more thoroughly and consistently present in a society. While Weil faults the attempts of earlier thinkers to develop socio-political systems and philosophies meant to harness the mechanistic power of necessity in a manner that would produce justice in the political realm, she nevertheless sees in these attempts a real and ineradicable human longing for justice that resists the totalizing power of tyranny and injustice. Following a discussion of the ways in which utilitarianism, Marxism, and classical economic liberalism have each after their own fashion sought to channel necessity for the perceived greater good of society, she offers an explanation for their failure:

Force is not a machine for automatically creating justice. It is a blind mechanism, which produces indiscriminately and impartially just or unjust results, but, by all the laws of probability, nearly always unjust ones. Lapse of time makes no difference; it doesn’t increase in the functioning of this mechanism the infinitesimal proportion of results which happen by chance to be in conformity with justice. Where force is absolutely sovereign, justice is absolutely unreal.

Irwin, “Devoured by God,” 6. The Weil quotation in the passage is from La Connaissance surnaturelle, 250.

Weil, The Need for Roots, 243.
Given Weil’s cosmology, in which necessity governs the whole of the universe, this seems indeed to be a pessimistic appraisal of the possibilities for justice. Her position on this topic is tied closely to her Platonic stance that the necessary and the good are at an infinite distance from one another; no attempt, however well-intentioned, to derive justice (with its close kinship to the good) from necessity can meet with success. No amount of time or progress can change that fact. Yet she goes on to say that, in spite of this, justice remains something quite real, even in the midst of a world ruled by the brute force of necessity. She insists that

justice cannot be [unreal]. We know it experimentally. It is real enough in the hearts of men. The structure of a human heart is just as much of a reality as any other in this universe, neither more nor less of a reality than the trajectory of a planet. It doesn’t lie within the power of any man absolutely to exclude all justice whatsoever from the ends which he assigns to his actions. The Nazis themselves have not been able to do this. If it were possible for men to do so, they would no doubt have managed it.\(^{327}\)

Justice, even when it seems to be wholly absent from human relationships and institutions, remains present, and its presence can be known “experimentally” in the hearts of human beings.

What Weil means by this notion of experimental knowing has in part to do with her concept of the human person and the indelible longing for the good which resides in the heart. Significantly, while this experimental knowledge of the presence of justice in the world may be made available within the more expansive social or political realms, the point of origin and the conduit for this knowledge is the individual. Weil takes issue with the classical liberal understanding of justice as the condition which prevails when the state is able to hold in balance the equal rights of various groups and individuals. If

justice is defined this way, in terms of an exercise of legislative or judicial power that is meant to enforce some kind of equality before the law or restitution for illegal acts, then Weil believes that it will remain forever “unreal” (in the sense of unrealized); that is, it will be unable to fulfill the human soul’s need for order and equality. In that case, it will be resented or at best cynically obeyed, and the state’s attempts to enforce such justice through an exercise of sheer power and without the true consent of the people will be despised on some level, rather than serving as a source of nourishment and authentic justice. This is so because, according to Weil, “power contains a sort of fatality which weighs as pitilessly on those who command as on those who obey; nay more, [since] it is in so far as it enslaves the former that, through their agency, it presses down upon the latter.”

There is thus no way for true and legitimate justice to be established in the socio-political sphere if the state attempts to ground it either in the exercise or the acceptance of power. This would appear to rule out all possibility of justice given Weil’s cosmology and political philosophy, by which she understands all human relationships—and socio-political relationships a fortiori—to be constituted in and through networks of power. However, Weil sees authentic justice to be realizable as long as it is grounded in something that is not subject to these corrupting and degrading networks of power relations. That something is the infinitely small point of contact in the soul with a pure goodness that lies outside the realm of necessity.

Whether one exercises power [force] or is its target, contact with power transforms man into a thing. Only whatever escapes its touch deserves the name of the good. But God alone is free of this touch, as are in part those people who have transferred and hidden a part of their soul in love for Him.

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As discussed in the previous chapter, all human beings have access within themselves to this point of contact with something that lies in “a realm situated above all [earthly] conditions,” yet only those who have consented to this contact—a consent that frequently results in decreation—are capable of instantiating justice at the socio-political level. They are able to do this because they first act justly at the interpersonal level, renouncing power in favor of the needs and existence of the other, and becoming a conduit for the pure love which can only manifest itself in the absence of force. “The sacrifice of the just transforms power into suffering and so, in a ‘supernatural’ way, puts a stop to libidinous expansion.”

Weil thus sees the connection between individual acts of justice and socio-political manifestations of justice in terms of a kind of “feedback loop.” When the physical and spiritual conditions in a country are such that they encourage individuals in their just, loving behavior toward others at the level of interpersonal interaction, then these individual instances of justice will permeate the socio-political sphere and reinforce the nascent presence of justice, order, equality, and other needs of the soul that contribute to a just polity. Weil’s contention that justice is something real—and realizable—in the world at the societal level is contingent upon its reality within the individual and at the level of interpersonal relationality.

In light of this, Weil makes a distinction between two forms of justice: the natural and the supernatural. The former occurs “when two human beings meet in such circumstances that neither is subject to the other and each has to an equal degree need of the consent of the other. Each one then, without ceasing to think in the first person, really

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understands that the other also thinks in the first person. Justice then occurs as a natural phenomenon."³³² Natural justice of this sort cannot truly be called by the name of harmony in Weil’s technical use of the term, since harmony applies only to those relationships which are unequal at the outset, and which therefore require a form of supernatural commensuration.³³³ Natural justice obtains on account of an already-extant equilibrium of force between two or more parties; it is only this naturally-occurring equilibrium that renders justice present in such cases. The moment that the balance of power shifts such that one person becomes less powerful than the other, the natural justice that up to that moment has held sway and governed their actions will disappear. The free consent to a just relationship in the case of natural justice is a consent won, not by means of the self’s decreation or attention to the specific claims of the other, but rather, by means of a fluke of necessity. When the force of necessity shifts, so also will the equilibrium shift. This is because neither party has undergone any voluntary diminution in power; each individual continues to “think in the first person,” which precludes any authentic recognition of the other’s existence or any real acknowledgment of the obligations owed to the other. Such justice is an equality that in reality is no more than a kind of identity: each self recognizes the perfectly equal power and selfhood of the other selves, not in terms of their concrete particularity and uniqueness, but merely in terms of uniform equivalence. This form of justice can exist within groups of people,

³³³ Springsted refers to this kind of natural justice as harmony in his *Christus Mediator* (see p. 179, where he writes of those forms of harmony which “occur as a natural phenomenon”). I think he is mistaken—what he writes of here is not technically harmony, which is a form of equality that preserves differentiation, but rather identity, a state in which a legislatable and socially attainable sameness-equality is substituted for the unlegislatable proportional relation of harmony-equality. Weil herself states that natural justice “does not constitute harmony:….it is a justice without friendship” (Weil, “Pythagorean Doctrine,” *Intimations of Christianity*, 173).
between individuals, and between societies, but it is neither true harmony, nor true friendship.

Authentically supernatural justice, on the other hand, can in reality be present only at the level of interpersonal relationality, and not at the level of the collectivity. Such justice is characterized by its purified relationality: because two human beings, in their perpetual quest to be each at the center of the universe, are condemned to remain wholly external to each other, they cannot be brought together into a just relationship of equality by any straightforward mechanism. Although they are always already relational creatures by virtue of the doubling of necessity, this relational status cannot be purified of the injustice which characterizes it so long as their relationship functions as an unmediated relationship between two contrary wills or forces. Such an “unredeemed” relationship exhibits nothing of the harmonic proportionality that characterizes authentic supernatural justice. Nor can a simple transfer of power or alteration in material conditions affect the combative externality which maintains the two individuals in their contrary stance. At the socio-political level, where justice must operate in the context of multiplicity and plurality, this proportional relation cannot be arbitrated, regulated, or enforced by means of political power. The best that can be hoped for in the social realm is a wisely-legislated form of natural justice that allows for the equalization of power among the maximum number of individuals. According to Weil, “[t]he legislator’s aim must be to make these occasions as numerous as possible.”

An equality of identity before the law is something that can be attained in the political realm, at least in the context of an asymptotic trajectory which aims at minimizing the conditions that force

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334 Weil, “The Pythagorean Doctrine,” *Intimations of Christianity*, 173. More will be said later about the conditions within a country that provide legislators with a fertile soil for the maximalization of natural justice.
human beings to have to choose between competing yet equally absolute obligations to others. Indeed, the most sacred of the soul’s needs, writes Weil, is the need for order in the socio-political sphere,

that is to say, a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones... At the present time, a very considerable amount of confusion and incompatibility exists between obligations. Whoever acts in such a way as to increase this incompatibility is a troublemaker. Whoever acts in such a way as to diminish it is an agent of order.335

An equality of harmony cannot be legislated, however—at least not in any officially-codified legal manner. An equality of identity requires only that every individual be considered on exactly the same terms as every other individual. The justice that operates in such cases holds the parties in relation only as long as the forces that render them equal—the law or natural circumstances—have the power to maintain the relation. A change in the law of the land can lead to conditions which render even this natural justice an unlikely occurrence. Supernatural justice, however, demands the dissolution of the two terms of the relation into the relation itself; this dissolution—a decretive effect of work, attention, or affliction—is not something that can be established or demanded at the level of collective. It cannot be mandated as law.

This sort of “supernatural” equality is an equality that respects particularity instead of eradicating it. Natural justice is blind, and renders its judgments according to the competing rights-claims of individuals who are considered identical, even to the extent that they are exchangeable. This exchangeability in the realm of natural justice is, of course, precisely the thing that Weber fears will result from supernatural or “mystical” forms of charity. According to Weil, however, authentically supernatural justice in

335 Weil, The Need for Roots, 10.
reality engenders an equality that is quite different from the equality of identity brought about by natural justice. Supernatural justice is a relation characterized by harmony, which she defines as “the union of contraries.” This union of contraries is not simply a matter of arbitrarily forcing two entities into a relationship. Rather, like the geometric mean of two incommensurable numbers, it is “the equality between two ratios having a common term, of the type a/b=b/c.” Because there are relatively few occurrences of natural justice under the present conditions of the socio-political realm, it is the case that most human beings are unable even to see the particularity and humanity of other entities in the universe, much less to renounce some part of their own power in order to permit the autonomous existence of those other entities. The few instances in which a natural equality of identity renders natural justice present between individuals are akin to the few instances of numbers which “have a special bond with unity,” that is, numbers with rational square roots, such as 9 and 16, for which a mean proportional can be established between these numbers and the number one (which for the Pythagoreans represents divine unity, since God cannot be multiple or plural). For example, 4 is the mean proportional between 1 and 16, as represented by the equation \( \frac{1}{4} = \frac{4}{16} \). The two terms of the equation are doubly relational: the fractions have a relationship with each other as singular units, and each fraction is itself the expression of a relationship between the numerator and the denominator. As with naturally-occurring justice, the relationship between these two terms is an equality of identity: \( \frac{1}{4} \) expresses precisely the same

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337 Ibid., 170-1.
338 Ibid., 159.
339 Ibid. Cf. Springsted, Christus Mediator, 165: “It is a historically confirmed fact that mathematical and religious contemplation did go hand in hand for the Pythagoreans… [They] claim[ed] that all created things are number and that one, which is not number, i.e. plurality, symbolizes God.”
relationship as 4/16. This is why every schoolchild learns that 4/16 can be “reduced” to 1/4 with no further operation required, and without the mediating function of other integers. The two terms of the relation are quite literally exchangeable. In similar fashion, the presence of natural justice permits a just relationship to exist between two individuals who are already perfectly equal—to the point of exchangeability—to one another. This, explains Weil, is why the Pythagoreans make the somewhat cryptic claim that “Justice is a number to the second power.”340 As Vance Morgan notes, “Just as 9 has a special bond with unity [i.e. the number one] through 3, so justice can occasionally be established on a natural basis.”341 This sort of justice, because it is present naturally with no further need of mediation, is beautiful in its own way, and should be valued and facilitated to the greatest degree possible.

Yet it is supernatural justice—akin to the commensuration of incommensurable numbers—that Weil considers to be the most beautiful form of justice. There is a twofold rationale for this. In the first place, in the context of faith, such mediation of incommensurables in the realm of number is an “image” or figure of Christ’s “mediation in the theological sense,”342 since Christ is the mediator between a God who is goodness and humans who are wholly other than goodness. As with two incommensurable numbers, whose mediation must be brought about via the introduction of an outside term to which each number is then placed in relation, so also must God and humanity—or, for that matter, two unequal human beings—be brought into just harmony by means of an outside term that shares a relationship to both incommensurate entities. Writes Weil,

340 Ibid.
Justice is that between which and God there is naturally mediation. On the other hand, there is not naturally mediation between sinners and God (they are ‘numbers not naturally similar’), just as there is not between unity and numbers other than square. But in the same way that geometry, through the destiny of plane figures, supplies a miraculous mediation for these numbers, so there is a miraculous operation, contrary to nature, which establishes a mediation between criminal humanity and God (‘assimilates to one another numbers not naturally similar’).  

For two numbers that possess no natural relationship with unity via a whole-number mean proportional, such a relationship can be expressed arithmetically only by expanding the definition of number to include irrational numbers (hence the development of the real number system), and by the introduction of a mediating term outside the two original numbers, to which both numbers can be related. According to Weil, the kind of justice which can be named harmony is in fact figured by this arithmetical operation, since it involves the introduction of an outside term—Christ or Λογος—to which each opposing party can be related as a means of making proportionate the two opposing parties. As she expresses it, “The assimilation to God can only be brought about by a proportional mean… The mean (metaxu) is the perfectly just man: God/God-man = God-man/man.” God and the human being, because they are incommensurable and separated by an infinite distance, cannot be related to one another directly. Rather, they

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344 The problem of incommensurables has a fairly straightforward geometric solution, known to Pythagoras. (This solution consists in making one line from the two incommensurate magnitudes in question, drawing a circle with that line as its diameter, and then dropping a perpendicular line from the meeting point on the diameter [the line that was drawn between the two incommensurate magnitudes] to the circumference of the circle. The perpendicular line will be the mean proportional between the two incommensurate magnitudes). The difficulty is that, prior to Eudoxus’ discovery of the real number system (which includes irrational numbers), there was no way to represent the commensuration arithmetically. “In modern notation, Eudoxus’ discovery says that for any numbers $a, b, c,$ and $d$ (where any or all of the numbers are possibly irrational), $a/b = c/d$ if for every possible pair of integers $m$ and $n$, 1. if $ma < nb$ then $mc < nd$; 2. if $ma = nb$ then $mc = nd$; 3. if $ma > nb$ then $mc > nd$. This provides a way to compare lines or magnitudes of any length, rational or irrational” (Morgan, Weaving the World, 123). Cf. Weil’s exegesis in Science, Necessity and the Love of God, 20.

must be set in relation by means of another relation, which participates in both incommensurate elements. In the second place, Weil sees the mediation of numbers whose mean can be expressed under normal circumstances only by an irrational number to be especially beautiful in the context of socio-political justice. This kind of mediation—developed by the Greek philosopher Eudoxus—offers “a paradigm of how apparently incommensurate features of reality can be unified on a higher level without denying the existence of the original incommensurability.” Applied to the concept of justice, this means that two unequal individuals can be brought into a just, harmonic relationship without rendering them identical or exchangeable. Such an equality—like the harmony Christ establishes between God and humanity—“is the harmony between incommensurable quantities that, in themselves, still remain incommensurable.” In effect, what takes place when justice of this sort is made manifest is an intensification of relationality. Instead of a mediation that renders both terms identical and exchangeable but does so only on account of the taut constraint generated between two naturally equal powers, there is a mediation that establishes an authentically relational justice by dissolving the inequality between the two terms into an equal relationship that exists at a more inclusive level. Writes Weil, “Correlations of contraries are like a ladder. Each of them raises us to a higher level where resides the connection which unifies the

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347 Morgan, *Weaving the World*, 153. Cf. Eric Springsted, “Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil,” *The Beauty That Saves*, eds. John M. Dunaway and Eric O. Springsted (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996), 16-7: “[Eudoxus’] new theory of numbers does not in the least change the incommensuration between two numbers having no common measure, for they still have no common measure. What it does do, however, is transcend the limitations of the natural and irrational numbers by conceiving an order of numbers that incorporates both, but is not reducible to the definitions of either.” That is, the status of the two terms remains unchanged; the change occurs at the level at which the terms are brought into harmony with one another.
contraries.” The contraries are unified—justice is made manifest—and yet this has not taken place by means of a natural identification that effaces all particularity or sublates the terms into a grand synthesis which does violence to their distinctive individuality. In this world, at least, justice must not be established on a foundation of pulverized particularity: Weil insists that any authentic manifestation of justice will be one in which it is possible to combine equality with differentiation. On this point, Weil is in agreement with Catherine Keller, who declares that

Justice is love under conditions of conflict. If love is the practice of difference as relation, love characterizes the spirit. Con/spiring in the differentiation of the universe, this public spirit immerses all becoming-subjects in their shared future: not necessarily a reassuring prospect, but a collective process of infinite reciprocations and devastating sensitivities. That process goes on before and after any particular life. Its demanding publicity, however, does not replace or relieve our psychic depth. From the depths we cry…

For both Weil and Keller, justice at the socio-political level depends upon the ability of individuals to love others, often at great cost to themselves, and always with the humbling realization that their own individual acts of loving justice are almost infinitely small parts of the larger whole, which extends backward and forward in time.

IV. Justice and the Social

Weil’s conception of harmonic justice as the correlation or commensuration of two contraries which preserves differentiation in equality is very close to the conception of equalitarian justice exemplified in several of the Presocratics, especially Heraclitus.

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(from whom Weil partly derives her cosmological-ethical use of the term \(\lambda \omega \gamma \omega \zeta\)\(^{351}\): “To express the harmony of the opposites Heracleitus does not say that they are equal but that they are one; to express their equivalence he says that they are ‘the same thing.’ This is no verbal accident… What he means is…not identity but equivalence.”\(^{352}\) In similar fashion, Weil sees such non-identical equivalence—or justice—as something that pertains to two opposing elements. Like Heraclitus, Weil is not, however, optimistic about the prospects for justice at the level of society as a whole. She shares with Heraclitus a negative evaluation of the folly of “the many” and their tendency to be led into error by prevailing opinion or demagoguery. The solution proposed by Heraclitus—a solution that is in some measure quite similar to Weil’s—is a notion of “the common” (\(\zeta \upsilon \nu \omicron \omicron \omicron \nu\)). For Heraclitus, “truth is ‘the common’; the world is ‘common’; and in the state, law is the ‘common’. This concept of the state as a community, united by a common stake in a common justice, is perfectly compatible with democratic politics… The core of his politics is the supremacy of the ‘common’—law.”\(^{353}\) This notion of a truth held in common also rests at the core of Weil’s positive assessment in her later work of the possibility for justice to exist even at the social or political level. This does not mean that she abandons her suspicion of the “Great Beast;” on the contrary, she retains her critique of the collectivity as something that in very many cases encourages error and illicitly stands in for the good as an object of devotion. Nevertheless, Weil recognizes that for humans, to live in society is ineluctable. Thus, she develops a distinction between living justly in a social milieu that nourishes its members and thereby becomes the object of a

\(^{351}\) Weil, “The Pythagorean Doctrine” Intimations of Christianity, 184  
\(^{353}\) Ibid., 166, 167.
kind of volonté générale, and being absorbed in and consumed by a collectivity that renders justice—natural and supernatural alike—utterly impossible. By connecting her conception of justice to her conception of love on the one hand, and consent on the other, she is able to extend justice beyond its origins in interpersonal contact to a broader manifestation at the socio-political level.\footnote{I use the term “socio-political” in reference—broadly—to political collectivities such as cities, states, or nation-states whose boundaries, while they may perhaps have been drawn arbitrarily through the years on account of geographical or political motives, nevertheless share in some common history and heritage. Weil, despite distinguishing between arbitrary political amalgams and genuine communities, nonetheless reverts to speaking of “the State” much as I do the “socio-political.” This she does—as I do—on account of the practical need for some sort of shorthand reference to the contemporary political reality, in which both the arbitrary and the organic for the most part exist together on the world stage.}

According to Weil, supernatural justice is present wherever two unequal individuals are made to be equal. In general, that can take place only when the person in the superior position voluntarily renounces the power that permits him to occupy the superior position. As Weil expresses it, such a renunciation involves a recognition on the part of the superior individual of the existence and autonomy of the inferior individual.

“Belief in the existence of other human beings as such is love.”\footnote{Weil, “Love,” Simone Weil Reader, 359.} This particular instantiation of love—love for the other, love for one’s neighbor—is a love to which Weil also gives “the name of justice—a name it bears in many passages of the gospel and which is so beautiful.”\footnote{Weil, “Spiritual Autobiography” Simone Weil Reader, 13. Cf. Weil, Waiting for God, 139: love of neighbor is not charity, but justice.} Indeed, she sees love and justice to be wholly coextensive:

\begin{quote}
Love and justice—To be just towards a being different from oneself means putting oneself in his place. For then one recognizes his existence as a person, not as a thing. This means a spiritual quartering, a stripping of the self; conceiving oneself as oneself \textit{and} as other.\footnote{Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 292.}
\end{quote}

It is love which bridges the fundamental inequality between self and other, and brings justice into existence where before there was only injustice and disharmony. The passage
above explains precisely how justice and love are related. In order to behave justly
toward someone else, it is necessary to dislodge the ego so that the other being can be
viewed *qua* human being—as a self in its own right, with all the claims and needs that
every human being possesses and all the obligations that are owed to every human being.
This practice of seeing the humanity of another individual—a practice Weil calls
“conceiving oneself as oneself *and* as other”—involves the painful, decreative process by
which one’s ego ceases to think in the first person. This means that the deeply-embedded
habit of disposing of others as one disposes of instruments or inert objects must be pulled
up by its roots. Only when this has been accomplished, and the other individual’s
existence recognized, can justice be present in the relationship. This operation is
characterized by consent: “[B]asically the supreme justice for us is acceptance of the
coexistence with ourselves of all creatures and all things which make up the existent.”

In consenting to the existence of the other, one is not only exercising one’s own faculty
of consent in a just fashion, but also recognizing the other’s faculty of consent, that is, the
other’s autonomy and freedom as a human being. This becomes particularly important in
the face of those who are suffering and afflicted, and whose existence is for the most part
wholly overlooked or instrumentalized by the world. They, more than anyone, are in
need of acknowledgement. Like the case of friendship (another form of supernatural
harmony), justice—or the compassion one has for an inferior—also involves the
commensuration of incommensurate entities through the faculty of consent. Writes Weil,

> Through this supernatural miracle of respect for human autonomy,
friendship is very like the pure forms of compassion and gratitude called
forth by affliction. In both cases the contraries which are the terms of the

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harmony are necessity and liberty, or in other words, subordination and equality. These two pairs of opposites are equivalent.\textsuperscript{359}

On the interpersonal level, then, justice—or the love of neighbor—consists in a supernatural equality brought into being when someone chooses not to exercise all the power available to her, and thereby consents to the liberty of the other. Necessity and liberty are conjoined in an harmonic union, and the relationship between subordinate and superior is transformed into a relationship of justice and equality.

The free exercise of the faculty of consent also lies at the heart of Weil’s schematization of justice at the social level.\textsuperscript{360} Weil’s philosophical anthropology and sociology do not allow for the possibility of a naturally-occurring just collective; because only individuals and not collectives are possessed of souls, only individuals are in the final analysis capable of the decréative “unselving” that instantiates justice. “It can only be given to the individual soul, in its most secret manifestations, to follow the path leading to such perfection.”\textsuperscript{361} Nevertheless, Weil allows for the possibility of justice within certain kinds of collectives by means of her Rousseau- and Kant-inflected reading of the Heraclitean notion of “the common.” She locates the prospect of a meaningful, genuine form of justice at the socio-political level in, on the one hand, the congruence of reason among disparate individuals, and on the other, the plausible existence of a kind of volonté générale out of which arises a love for the patrie as a “vital milieu.” Justice, in Weil’s reading, remains the provenance of individuals, insofar as its presence within a collective necessarily begins at the interpersonal level. However, a single instance of this

\textsuperscript{359} Weil, “Friendship” Simone Weil Reader, 370.
\textsuperscript{361} Weil, The Need for Roots, 160.
sort of justice—and the differentiated equality which it brings into being—can be extended and connected with other similar instances because of the mediating principle of reason that orders it. Notes Moulakis,

The search for a meaningful—that is, more or less genuine—consensus…is possible in principle, according to Weil, because opinions developed independently of each other are congruent in their reasonable parts. They deviate from each other, on the other hand, in their errors, which are rooted in passion, the *principium individuationis*.*

If supernatural justice between two individuals requires the mediation of an outside term—that is, of *logos*—then the presence of *logos* will allow for an assimilating congruence among all such instances of justice which occur within the social sphere. This is so because “truth is one, but error is manifold.”* This singular truth, in the context of justice, has to do with the graced capacity to recognize the presence of another, equal human being even when the other wears the trappings of inequality and lesser prestige, as measured by society. This obligation to behave justly toward others is an obligation that “has no foundation, but only a verification in the common consent accorded by the universal conscience… It is recognized by everybody without exception in every single case where it is not attacked as a result of interest or passion.”* Here we see Weil’s characteristic alliance between a consent at the level of the individual conscience (that hidden part of the soul that operates as a point of contact with the good), and the outcome of such consent at the socio-political level when it is significantly present. This alliance is a loose confederation rather than an easy pole-bounded

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362 Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, 203. This notion of error is not, of course, unique to Weil, who shares it with most other heirs to certain elements of the Platonic tradition throughout history, from Plotinus to Schleiermacher; in Weil, error, considered as the subjugation of reason to the passions, also plainly shows the influence of stoicism and Kantianism.
364 Ibid., 5.
continuum, since the principle which permits the alliance between the individual and social elements is one of assimilation; insofar as the social is subject to the whims and passions of the crowd, that faculty of consent to justice held in common by all human beings is at risk of being overcome. However, Weil insists that the presence of just individuals within a collective, along with their individual acts of loving justice and their consent to the existence of the other, can function as a form of leavening within the collective as a whole.

According to Weil, however, just individuals—already an endangered species—will be even rarer in a political environment which has lost its ability to serve as a vital milieu for its citizens. In this case, its citizens will experience the wretchedness of being uprooted, denied both a connection with the past and its living tradition, and the hope for a possible future which nourishes and gives meaning to the present. Injustice—the inability to recognize and consent to the existence and autonomy of others and the desire to make use of others for one’s own advantage—becomes epidemic in a political sphere characterized by uprootedness. Weil describes this state as a

\[ \text{Quasi-hell on earth: complete uprooting in affliction. Human injustice generally produces not martyrs but quasi-damned souls. Beings who have fallen into this quasi-hell are like the man stripped and wounded by thieves. They have lost the clothing of character. The greatest suffering which allows some roots to remain intact is still infinitely removed from this quasi-hell.} \]

\[365\] Weil, *Notebooks*, vol. 1, 252.


A state which functions as a vital milieu for its citizens, however, can become “a life-giving agent,…good, root-fixing ground,…a favourable setting for participation in and loyal attachment to all other sorts of environmental expression.”\[366\] *The Need for Roots*, written in 1943 while Weil was in exile in London working for the Free French,
represents her most extensive treatment of this theme of rootedness as a prerequisite for the presence of justice within the political sphere. Nations or political collectivities are never deserving of respect in and of themselves; rather, they merit respect and honor insofar as they provide nourishment—physical and spiritual—for human beings. Weil likens this to the respect and care one owes to a cornfield, “not because of itself, but because it is food for mankind. In the same way, we owe our respect to a collectivity, of whatever kind—country, family, or any other—not for itself, but because it is food for a certain number of human souls.”  

A collectivity which is “real” is one which offers to its constituent members unique nourishment of a sort which cannot be found anywhere else, and “if destroyed, cannot be replaced.”  

Each genuinely rooted country, region, or group fosters and sustains unique customs, conventions, even dialects and cuisines which belong to that region alone. These elements provide a central core, a set of things that can be held in common and loved by those to whom they belong. A second criterion for establishing the legitimacy of a collectivity’s rootedness is that of continuity with the future. It must contain nourishment for future generations, and hope for the future for current generations. A final criterion is its continuity with the past. A collectivity “constitutes the sole agency for preserving the spiritual treasures accumulated by the dead, the sole transmitting agency by means of which the dead can speak to the living.”  

When a collectivity cannot meet these criteria to the fullest extent possible, it means that it is dead, or diseased, or in a profoundly weakened state. When it does meet

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367 Ibid., 7.
368 Ibid., 8.
369 It is in part on this account that Weil writes so frequently and heatedly of France’s conquest of the regions south of the Loire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. She considers the Albigensian Crusade to be an affront, as it obliterated the unique language, customs, and cultural achievements of Provence, the Languedoc, etc. She roundly condemns any person or nation which seeks to conquer and uproot others.
370 Weil, The Need for Roots, 8.
these criteria, however, it gives to its members something in common to love and respect, and moreover, something that is authentically deserving of such respect. Only when the nation has deserved such respect, love, and loyalty on account of the nourishment it provides, will its political structures and legal apparatuses be considered legitimate by its members, and be accorded the obedient love that is due to “La sainte majesté des lois.”

Writing as she is when France is under grave threat, Weil particularly emphasizes this notion that a people, if they are to have roots in their country, must have a country to which they can direct their love, and which they can in good conscience serve and defend as a people. Like Heraclitus, who enjoins “the demos to fight on behalf of the law as for the city walls,” Weil urges the French to defend France, not only against the tangible, visible German military forces, but also against the intangible, invisible internal disorder and disease which destroy the roots of the patrie and make it an unfavorable setting for the amelioration of alienation and despair. Only a collectivity which can provide its members with appropriate nourishment is suitable as an object of love or patriotic loyalty.

This presents a difficulty for Weil however, since she is well aware that such collectivities are rare things, and hence patriotism is in most times and places unfounded; she consistently condemns the sentiment that leads citizens to proclaim, “Right or wrong, my country.” The German occupation of France does not induce her arbitrarily to give up her longstanding suspicion of the passions which inform the crowd, and which she considers so dangerous. As Moulakis notes, “There is a conflict between the demand for purity of individual thinking—or, in Simone Weil’s later writings, the uncreated portion

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371 Weil, The Need for Roots, 180. Here she is citing a favorite author, the seventeenth-century Provençal poet Théophile de Viau, who writes of “the sacred majesty of the laws.”
372 Diehls, B44.
373 See Weil, The Need for Roots, 130.
of the human soul—and the necessity of defiling social action. It is a conflict of which Weil was very much aware.“\textsuperscript{374} She frames the conflict in terms of the contrast between the infinite good which alone merits unconditional human love and loyalty, and a finite or limited good such as a nation, which at its best deserves merely conditioned love and loyalty. “Whereas to the welfare of the soul, or in other words to God, a total, absolute, and unconditional loyalty is owed, the welfare of the State is a cause to which only a limited and conditional loyalty is owed.”\textsuperscript{375} The problem with this, of course, is that there are certain moments in history when, in order for a nation to preserve its roots and its vitality, it must ask of its citizens an absolutely unconditional love, even to the point of self-sacrifice. This unconditioned love for a contingent good is something Weil ordinarily decrises as the essential definition of idolatry. In particular cases, however—for instance, when the nation is a truly vital milieu and when its very survival is under threat—this kind of love may become acceptable. Patriotic love and devotion are rendered legitimate in these cases, not because the nation is a powerful, autonomous state whose glory must be buttressed or extended, but rather, because it provides its citizens with something life-giving and fragile, and thus deserves protection. As Weil notes, “Patriotism. One must not have any other form of love but charity. A nation cannot be an object of charity. But a country can be, as an environmental source of eternal traditions. All countries can be such.”\textsuperscript{376} In a certain sense, then, the patrie is a finite good which is standing in for the infinite good, and in so doing, it presents to its citizens a

\textsuperscript{374} Moulakis, \textit{Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial}, 191.
\textsuperscript{375} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}, 115.
\textsuperscript{376} Weil, \textit{Notebooks}, vol. 2, 504. Cf. Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}, 172: “One can either love France for the glory which would seem to ensure for her a prolonged existence in time and space; or else one can love her as something which, being earthly, can be destroyed, and is all the more precious on that account.”
vulnerable object toward which their charitable love might be directed in the hope of preserving a vital milieu where justice can continue to exist.

In such cases, collective action on behalf of the patrie can in some measure avoid the passion and mania which so often characterize the action of the crowd. A people’s love for the patrie,

far from reducing them to a collective state, awakens in them a need of the soul for which affliction, battering their country, precludes satisfaction. Their engagement might seem to have, if viewed from the outside, the uniformity of collective behavior, but in fact, their actions, executed in common, have each time as their source the singularity of their being, in the force of their conviction.377

Rather than eliciting manic, blind devotion from the masses—something that Weil considers a hallmark of totalitarian regimes led by charismatic dictators—the patrie as endangered vital milieu serves instead to draw forth a response of love from its constituents. The threat of its impending loss evokes in each individual citizen a recognition of her obligation to protect it, in order that its continued existence might ensure the perduring presence of those elements it proffers which satisfy the “needs of the soul” for all its members. The country thus functions as a metaxu, an intermediary between the individual and God, but one which, on account of the circumstances, can be an intermediary for all the individuals in the country at one and the same time. Explains Weil,

[T]here are certain occasions when the march of public events occupies so much more important a place in the personal life of each of us than does the course of individual affairs, that a number of hidden thoughts and hidden needs of this sort are found to be the same with practically all the human beings that go to make up a people.378

This common inspiration does not remove the operation of mediation from the individual sphere to the collective sphere in Weil’s schematization.\textsuperscript{379} Nor does it immunize the patrie from all wrongdoing or from the ever-present possibility that it will devolve into a corrupt and monstrous instrument of oppressive statecraft. Nevertheless, such inspiration allows the cohesive, unified action of individuals to serve the worthy cause of the preservation of an important metaxu. This is no trifling matter for Weil, who states categorically that “No human being should be deprived of his metaxu, that is to say of those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a human life is not possible.”\textsuperscript{380} The preservation of these metaxu when they are in jeopardy justifies the loyal love of patriotism, and serves as the means for linking together the actions of individuals undertaken collectively in defense of the patrie. When these mediating elements are, in fact, present in the socio-political sphere, then it becomes far more likely that justice will be present more broadly and consistently, as well. The specific ways in which justice is instantiated in vital milieux, along with the particular manifestations of justice as love and consent in the socio-political context, will be discussed in greater detail in the fifth chapter. For now it will suffice to conclude this chapter with an examination of the potential dangers—especially for those groups of people who already suffer from a lack of power and prestige in society—in Weil’s understanding of decreation as the preeminent mechanism for achieving justice.

\textsuperscript{379} Cf. Saint-Sernin, \textit{L’Action Politique selon Simone Weil}, 180: “Only thus does the distinction become plain—a distinction that is madness under ordinary circumstances—between private action, which is without decisive effect on the life of the cité, and political action, which has influence on a kind of community politics. These two types of action are the province of individuals, who in the final analysis, are the only ones endowed with the capacity to choose.” Translation mine.

\textsuperscript{380} Weil, “Metaxu” \textit{Simone Weil Reader}, 365.
V. Decreation and Masochism

Vital to Weil’s notion of justice as love of neighbor and consent to the existence of the other is, as we noted, her concept of decreation. The supernatural harmony that constitutes true justice cannot come into existence unless the self renounces all claims it has—however inauthentic or illusory—to the central perspective it seeks to occupy. The uncompromising radicality of Weil’s language in describing this process of decreation raises certain questions, however. Her detractors have expressed that this fierce, even intransigent, insistence upon self-annihilation represents, not a mystical piety or a call for true humility, but rather, “a self-righteous zeal that is, at times, rather chilling.”

Even those who view her project in a more favorable light are inclined toward a certain wariness. In a reflection on the potent effect Weil’s words possess, Alex Irwin writes, “Simone Weil may have been mad. She was certainly violent. Her words seduce; they are beautiful and frightening. Even dead, she fascinates. Even dead, she remains dangerous.”

The dangerous character of Weil’s call for self-surrender looms especially large for those who historically have been denied access to autonomous selfhood in the first place. Indeed, as theologian Catherine Keller observes, the call to agapic self-sacrifice may indeed provide the proper corrective to the hypertrophic masculine ego, which patriarchal society eggs on to inflated forms of ego development. But women sin in the opposite…direction: that of the underdevelopment of the self. In a social situation of women’s subordination, when the male preachers and teachers exhort the predominantly female flock to deny themselves and practice obedience, they reinforce women’s already unhealthy dependency upon men for spiritual, cultural, and economic identity.

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381 Oates, “‘May God Grant That I Become Nothing,’” 152.
382 Irwin, “Devoured By God,” 272.
For women, selfhood and its attendant privileges, rights, and liberties are precious and hard-won possessions, obtained too recently to renounce blithely, with total disregard for the consequences. Unmitigated self-annihilation of the sort Weil demands is, alas, all too familiar to many women, who have been taught through the centuries to practice it with an unrelenting and generally successful force. Weil’s disturbing and “terrible” prayer—“May God grant that I become nothing”—thus strikes many as a criminal, even impossible demand for those whose selfhood is not yet substantial enough even to contain enough matter or real existence to be evacuated by means of the decreative process.

Thus far, Keller follows the standard feminist critique of extreme forms of asceticism—a critique which can be applied readily to Weil insofar as she offers a program of asceticism that leads ultimately to a total emptying of the self. Where Keller departs from this standard critique, and where she becomes an important interlocutor for Weil (and for present-day feminists who are interested in retrieving some notion of kenosis in a contemporary context while managing to resist the otherworldly, overly-spiritualized, anti-woman implications of asceticism’s past), is in her insistence on the sinful status of the autonomous, super-individuated self. As Keller describes it, the separative self is active in its efforts to define itself over and against the Other (where Other is usually understood as female or feminine in character). It is intent upon closing its borders against any real relations or influences, and it is blind to the ways in which it is always already implicated in the web of structures comprising necessity. Sinfully attempting to imitate a God whose primary attributes are power and absolute agency,

“separative selves” (to employ Keller’s language) achieve full selfhood only by reflecting the properties of this God to the greatest extent possible. The result of this specious *imitatio dei* is precisely the sort of mechanical, cataleptic immersion in one’s own limited perspective that Weil denounces. Alongside this distinctively Weilian accent, Keller places an equal stress on the notion—similarly Weilian—that only an authentically relational self, emptied of its illusory pretensions to total control and domination, can love, serve, and minister to the needs of others. Rather than arguing, as so many feminist critics of asceticism do, that the only way forward for women is the path of greater autonomy and amplified self-determination taken by men, Keller observes that such a path has led primarily to paradigms of domination, to ugly, insoluble, triumphalistic arguments over rights, and to the exploitation of humans and of the earth in the name of development and control. She is adamant that this grasping after a separative self of one’s own is a most damaging response—not only for women, but for human beings in general and for the entire cosmos. Explains Keller

> As ‘Man,’ we aspire to independence, individuality (indivisibility) and separateness of being as women precisely because these traits had been, have been, continue to be, denied to us, because their opposite—dependency, undifferentiated nonentity, and self-definition by relation—have been required of us by an inside cultural agent effective long after the outer voices have been named and muted.\(^{385}\)

Yet Keller declares that these aspirations to autonomy and enclosed selfhood—were they fully realized—would soon prove as poisonous for women and for the planet’s environment as they have proven for men.

Keller’s proposal for resisting the seductive allure of autonomous selfhood is one that, despite many superficial differences, shares much with Weil’s decreative program.

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Although Weil never expresses her critique of autonomous selfhood in terms of gender as Keller does, it is clear enough that the end result of Weil’s decretive process looks much the same as the result Keller hopes will be achieved by means of her elaboration of a relational ontology, through which novel possibilities for self-formation come into being. Such an ontology—influenced as it is by Keller’s Whiteheadian commitments—seeks to describe reality in such a way that it becomes plain how profound and constitutive the category of relation is to the being of each and every entity in the cosmos. As in Weil’s schematic, this constitutive relationality can go unrecognized by those who are blind to it—that is, by those who Keller claims persist in imagining that they are discrete, enclosed centers of power in control of their world and all that is within it. For Keller as for Weil, it is only when this relationality has been “redeemed” that authentically relational selfhood becomes possible. According to Keller, the transcendent, powerful, male, separative self of patriarchy—created, reinforced, and upheld through the ages in part by the transcendent, powerful, male, separative God of the Judeo-Christian world—simply cannot be the ideal for which newly-liberated women should strive. As centuries of the subjugation and abuse of women have demonstrated, such a concept of selfhood necessarily requires the oppression and exploitation of the Other in order to come to fruition and full realization; whether that Other becomes defined as people of color, developing nations, or the natural world, the amplification of autonomous selfhood will prove—indeed, already has proven—to be a disaster of the worst sort.\textsuperscript{386} Instead, Keller

\textsuperscript{386} Keller states, “And we have come also to realize that the specific oppression of women, as the most universal form of social subjugation, cannot be understood in isolation from the intertwined sufferings imposed by injustice toward all who live in situations of social vulnerability—including not only the poor and those of color, but the earth and all its creatures. Patriarchy, as the original and most pervasive model of systematic exploitation, names the superstructure depending upon all these sufferings. So any feminist spirituality unfolds in and through and enlarged, politicized, and yet intricately particularized web-consciousness” (Keller, “Scoop Up the Water,” 103).
proposes a concept of redeemed and renewed selfhood that, much like Weil’s notion of decreated selfhood, relies upon a kind of permeability to the network of forces and entities of which the universe is made. For both Keller and Weil, choosing to recognize, love, and live out concretely this permeable, relational selfhood paradoxically entails at once a penetrable openness to all reality that dissolves the calcified boundaries of the fallaciously autonomous self, and a maximalization of the true and authentic autonomy that marks the human being as a free and independent creature.

According to Keller, this new possibility for selfhood necessarily exhibits an ambiguity: it remains identifiable as a self, and yet it retains no trace of its illusory, imaginary grasping for power and domination. She explains that, having been redeemed, “the self contains within its parameters everything that is not itself; yet the self is clearly distinguishable as itself. It selves the world. There is nothing that is not somewhere part of it; yet in a moment it parts with its own selfness. Its immediacy perishes into the subsequent world. It is not as true to say that its boundaries are permeable as that it permeates the unbounded.”387 The interpenetration of the finite and the unbounded is the mark of this newly-redeemed selfhood, and it makes itself known by means of the fruit of love and justice for the other that it bears: “By tracing this infinite layering within the topos of the deep, within the relational density of its enfolded darkness, may we work to decolonize our corner of ‘the creation?’ If so, we join a long tradition.”388 Although Weil’s language—rooted deeply as it is in her peculiar readings of Neoplatonism and Neo-Kantianism—has quite a different ring, the kind of decreated selfhood she espouses comes very near to that advocated by Keller. According to Weil, decreation involves

387 Keller, From a Broken Web, 195.
choosing to “be annihilated by the plenitude of being.” What else is this but Keller’s permeation of and by the unbounded? Like Keller, Weil holds that this transformative operation becomes manifest to the world only by means of the orientation one adopts toward the particular beings (in all their socio-historical concreteness) whom one encounters in the world. As Weil notes, “You shall judge them by their fruits. There is no greater evil than to do evil to men, and no greater good than to do good to men… One cannot perceive the presence of God in a man, but only the reflection of that light in his manner of conceiving earthly life.” This dual emphasis on permeability and relationality on the one hand, and on the tangible, material, ethical ramifications of these characteristics on the other, is something that is present in both Weil and Keller. Keller permits a reading of Weil’s more radical and unsettling language concerning decreation: a reading that, while taking seriously the undeniable danger of masochism inherent in Weil’s program, allows for an evaluation of decreation that focuses on its significant ethical implications and its claims for nurturing an authentic, maximal selfhood. Rather than excoriating Weil for her “gnostic” hatred of the material world and her destructive glorification of self-annihilation, one becomes able, by means of a conversation with Keller, to appreciate the profundity of Weil’s critique of the more damaging aspects of modernity’s grasping, autonomous self. That is not to exonerate Weil wholly from the charge that her particular manner of speaking about decreation, and indeed, perhaps even her entire program of decreation itself, contain at least the seeds of precisely those dangers and threats to the already-insecure status of female selfhood about which Weil’s

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389 Weil, *Simone Weil Reader*, 435. This language also has much in common with the language employed by many medieval women mystics—for example, Julian of Norwich, Hadewijch, and Marguerite of Porete—a similarity that is marked by Keller, as well. This commonality will be discussed in later chapters.

390 Ibid., 427.
critics are so concerned. Nevertheless, re-reading Weil in the light of Keller provides support for the claim that Weil’s notion of decreation ought not be interpreted reductively as a pernicious and violent masochism. 391

To read Weil in this more charitable light means also that we must take seriously her insistence upon the important place occupied by the concrete realities of the various metaxu, and the embodied particularities of individual human beings. She matter-of-factly observes that the obligation one has to respect and behave justly toward another human individual “is only performed if the respect is effectively expressed in a real, not a fictitious, way; and this can only be done through the medium of man’s earthly needs.” 392 These needs—both physical and spiritual in nature—are simultaneously universal and particular. They are universal insofar as they exist throughout human history and across cultural and geographic divides; they are particular insofar as they manifest themselves differently according to customs, conventions, and historical contingencies. 393 One’s vision only becomes clear enough to see the stark reality of this obligation to the other when one’s ordinarily skewed perspective is radically decentered through the process of decreation. For it is only decreation, “the reversal of the body’s flow, the reversal of necessity…[that permits one] to realise the fullness of humanity and to enable selfless action: through renunciation, the self can act with total compassion for the welfare of

391 For another, quite different attempt to acquit Weil’s decreative project of the charges of masochism, particularly in light of the tenuous selfhood of women in history, see Bregman, “The Barren Fig Tree.” Bregman makes an effort—with questionable success—to interpret Weil’s seemingly masochistic behaviors in terms of a Freudian theory redeemed by a Christian structure of paradox.


393 For instance, the need for food to satisfy physical hunger and ensure survival is universal; the type and amount of food due to each person will vary according to the particular characteristics of the person and the environment in which she lives. Someone who lives on a small island has a need for food, just the same as someone who inhabits a land-locked state in the middle of the United States. However, the islander’s need for food does not entail a claim for wheat or cattle, but rather for fish. The land-locked American, in like fashion, is entitled to bread or beef, but not to lobster.
others.”

Without this shift in perspective, this uncompromising evacuation of ego in favor of a Christic relation-in-love, any attempt to act charitably or compassionately toward those who are in need will be marked by precisely the kind of substitutability with which Weber takes issue. Weil demonstrates a quite thorough understanding of this potential hazard when she observes that only those who have passed through decreative affliction can exercise compassionate, just love for those who suffer:

Those whom Christ recognized as his benefactors are those whose compassion rested upon the knowledge of affliction. The others give capriciously, irregularly, or else too regularly, or from habit imposed by training, or in conformity with social convention, or from vanity or emotional pity, or for the sake of a good conscience—in a word, from self-regarding motives. They are arrogant or patronizing or tactlessly sympathetic, or they let the afflicted man feel that they regard him simply as a specimen of a certain type of affliction. In any case, their gift is an injury… Those who have not seen the face of affliction, or are not prepared to, can only approach the afflicted behind a veil of illusion or falsehood.

Weil makes it entirely clear that decreation alone enables the manifestation of justice and love for others; without it, there is no way of seeing another human being as anything other than an instrument at one’s disposal, a substitutable example of wretchedness conveniently present in order to allow one to feel good about all the charity and kindness one offers. This can never be called by the name of justice, and it can never serve as a metaxu relating love in this world to supernatural love. Indeed, Weil calls it “a lie, for ‘he who loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how should he love God whom he

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394 Flood, The Ascetic Self, 54.
395 Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction,” Simone Weil Reader, 459, emphasis mine. Cf. Weil, The Need for Roots, 158, where Weil denounces “the practice of good works carried out in a certain spirit, ‘for the love of God,’ as they say, the unfortunate objects of compassion being but the raw material for the action, an anonymous means whereby one’s love of God can be manifested.”
hath not seen?' It is only through things and individual beings on this earth that human love can penetrate to that which lies beyond.”

CHAPTER 4:

LIVING MATERIAL, STANDING RESERVE:

LABOR, TECHNOLOGY, AND UPROOTEDNESS

I. A Politics of Material Transformation

It may come as a surprise to many to learn that the bulk of Simone Weil’s writing consists of political and philosophical rather than purely spiritual or theological texts, and that far from occupying her attention only in the first half of her life (prior to her “conversion” experiences), her political philosophy remained significant in her writing and her thought until the very end of her life in 1943. Indeed, The Need for Roots—her last major work, written in the context of her activities with the Free French government in exile in London—deals with France’s troubled political history and the possibilities for its rebirth after the second world war. Yet substantially more scholarly attention overall has been given to her religious and spiritual writings than to political thought, and when scholars have engaged with the political thought, it is often examined as something ancillary or even opposed to her spiritual thought. Alternatively, the political writings are sometimes examined on their own terms by political theorists who take little interest in the relationship between Weil’s political and spiritual thought.

Neither of these approaches can do justice to the intimate interrelation of the mystical-

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397 As one author notes, “Virtually all of her published writings during her lifetime had to do with political and ideological debates, workers’ oppression, individual liberation, matters of legitimate authority of government or human rights and justice; or it was writing that related to her intellectual interests in classical Greek literature and science, Plato or Descartes… and related philosophical concerns.” Richard H. Bell, Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion (Lanham, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 212.
political in Weil’s work. Nor can such reductionist readings of her political theory adequately assess the nuanced and challenging proposals Weil makes in her attempts to develop critical and constructive political positions—positions which, on account of their prescience vis-à-vis such topics as technology and labor, imperialism and colonialism, and capitalism’s excesses, have relevance for current political philosophy.

The general lack of really thorough and careful evaluations of Weil’s political thought is no doubt partly due to the difficulties her political theory presents when taken as a whole: her thought is deeply committed to leftist principles and closely connected to syndicalism and French forms of disaffected Marxism, while simultaneously seeming to share certain important elements with a Burkian reactionary nostalgia or Bernanos’ conservative monarchism; it draws upon communitarian anti-political and Christian anarchist values in ways that are quite close to Proudhon and Tolstoy, and yet it extols obedience to the established political order as one of the needs of the soul and advocates media and literary censorship in certain circumstances; it seeks to develop the possibilities for a just political sphere for many out of an ethical sphere which is intensely focused on the face-to-face encounter of individuals; it presents a deeply moving vision of a nation as a collective which nourishes and gives life to a people while also decrying most collectives as instances of Plato’s “Great Beast” which submerge the individual’s capacity for reason under a tide of idolatry, superstition, and group-think. These

398 Of course, such a lack is not total. There are a number of scholars who have written sensitively and with attention on Weil’s political thought, for example, David McLellan, Edward Andrew, Athanasios Moulakis, Lawrence Blum and Victor Seidler, and Louis Patsouras among others.

399 See her letter to Georges Bernanos, in which she speaks of her disillusioning experiences fighting with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War: “One sets out as a volunteer, with the idea of sacrifice, and finds oneself in a war which resembles a war of mercenaries, only with much more cruelty and with less human respect for the enemy... What do I care that you are a royalist, a disciple of Drumont? You are incomparably nearer to me than my comrades of the Aragon militias—and yet I loved them,” (Weil, “Letter to Georges Bernanos,” Selected Essays, 175).
complexities ought not disqualify Weil’s political thought from serious consideration, however; rather, they serve as an indication of her status as a genuinely independent thinker who is less interested in affiliating with a particular political school or ideology than in developing relevant, creative, and challenging political possibilities for a deeply complicated, often violent world, regardless of the origins or contexts out of which such possibilities arise. Indeed, David McLellan aptly deems Weil “peculiar” and “intellectually stateless,” arguing that it is precisely her refusal to ally herself categorically or programmatically with any single political position which permits her thought to range so widely and bear fruit so richly. Her ability to assess critically the potentialities and problems of an array of political options from Plato to Proudhon, or Rousseau to Marx, and to retrieve, deconstruct, and reorganize various elements of disparate political theories makes her own political thought a valuable resource, despite its complexities and shortcomings.

At the heart of Weil’s political theory lies the ethical individual who is not, as we have seen, the substantial and autonomous self of both premodern and modern political life. Rather, the ethical individual—the one who becomes capable of instantiating justice and who serves as the constitutive element in her construction of the just political sphere—is precisely not a self, at least not in the sense of a wholly independent, crystallized locus of being possessed of will, intellect, desires, and the capacity to act. The truly ethical self in Weil’s thought is the decreated self—that is, the self which has

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400 For example, despite acknowledging her profound debt to Marx on so many fronts, when she criticizes Marx’s lack of foresight regarding the development of a state bureaucracy, she somewhat wryly notes, “Certainly Marx never foresaw anything of this kind. But not even Marx is more precious to us than the truth.” (Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 6). One could substitute almost any thinker or position for “Marx” in these sentences and it would represent accurately Weil’s refusal to sacrifice what she saw as her intellectual integrity for the sake of conformity to a platform, however much she might appreciate or sympathize with certain of its tenets.

relinquished its spurious and illusory autonomy in order to become a transparent and relational self, and which serves as a channel for divine love for others in the absence of the divine. According to Weil, it is only via such a mediation that justice can be made present in the world, and yet this claim—and the implication that a just political sphere can be constructed on the basis of what some political thinkers term an ethic or a moral philosophy—has been called anti-political or apolitical, or at best, “a sort of prolegomenon to political life.”\textsuperscript{402} Indeed, Conor Cruise O’Brien claims that “Simone Weil is necessarily an enemy of political involvement... [T]o be rigorously antipolitical is to be antihuman as well.”\textsuperscript{403} Is it in fact the case that Weil mistakes ethical justice for political justice, or that she erroneously and naïvely renders morality and polity convertible or substitutable? Is it possible to construct a rich and convincing account of political life with its necessarily complex and plural relations among citizens, leaders, and sub-groups on a foundation that fundamentally has to do with the ethical relationship between individuals? Does Weil’s deep and abiding mistrust of the collective—of “the first person plural” as she often calls it\textsuperscript{404}—ultimately preclude the possibility of a genuinely political theory, despite the attention she pays to her own revised version of Rousseau’s volonté générale and the extent to which she develops her vision of the ideal political life in many of her writings, most notably Oppression and Liberty and The Need for Roots?

\textsuperscript{402} McLellan, Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist, 257. His phrase echoes T.S. Eliot’s statement that Weil’s political writings belong “in that category of prolegomena to politics which politicians seldom read, and which most of them would be unlikely to understand or to know how to apply” (Eliot, “Preface,” in Weil, The Need for Roots, xii).


\textsuperscript{404} Weil, “The Pythagorean Doctrine,” Intimations of Christianity, 177.
This chapter, together with the next, represents an attempt to answer these questions. I suggest that Weil’s mystically-inflected relational anthropology, focused as it is upon the notion of the decreated self, in fact allows her to develop a new and ultimately unique framework for a kind of political life that cannot be assimilated completely to any existing political platform or ideology, but instead serves as a radically unclassifiable, theoretical and yet also thoroughly practical resource for integrating the political and the mystical into contemporary life. In order to understand Weil’s mystical-political approach to the political sphere and to grasp the mechanisms by which she brings together the political with an ethical mysticism, it will be necessary first to address a basic problematic that arises in the context of Weil’s politically-oriented writing: namely, the nature of technology, its transformation of labor and its threat to the enrootedness of human life. The focus of this chapter, then, is Weil’s treatment of technology and history, particularly in light of the modern problems of deracination, alienation, and an instrumental mentality with its concomitant threats of human enslavement and global despoliation.

Certainly, Weil is ambivalent toward technology: she sees it as something which may possess at least some liberative potential under certain strict conditions, but also as something which menaces peace and a human scale of measurement in enterprise, industry, and science. In this respect, she has much in common with the late Heidegger, for whom the essence of technology—Gestell—operates simultaneously as a threat that may block human beings’ relation to the truth, and as a “saving power” that may enable humans to safeguard the coming-to-presence of truth. However, this doubled possibility does not in the case of either thinker indicate that technology is something merely
neutral. Also like Heidegger, Weil sees as one of the chief dangers of thoroughgoing technological rationalization the endless, non-teleological transformation of one material—including human or “living” material as Weil calls it\(^{405}\)—into another. For Heidegger and Weil alike, this characteristic makes all objects infinitely substitutable; when thinking beings enter into this “standing reserve” (to use Heidegger’s phrase), they also become part of the vicious cycle of infinite substitutability, with the consequence that humans seek (with some success) to wield technology in ways that instrumentalize and destroy their world and others. This process disguises a deeper process, however, through which humans, rather than mastering technology, in fact are mastered \textit{by} technology. Both Heidegger and Weil propose a solution to this “question concerning technology;” for both thinkers, the solution involves in part the reconceptualization of the relationship between human beings and technology by means of attention and beauty, and both also emphasize the role of the individual over and against the collectivity, but Weil retains a greater degree of skepticism as to whether such a reconceptualization can come into being in a world that is already so thoroughly immersed in the process of rationalization.

II. Progress and Revolution: Weil’s Critique of Marx.

“Marx’s great idea,” writes Weil, “is that in society as well as in nature, nothing
takes place except by means of material transformations.”\textsuperscript{406} Yet the chief problem with
Marx, Weil observes, is that he himself fails to achieve a thoroughgoing and consistent
materialism when it comes to the category of social matter. According to Weil, Marx’s
brilliant analysis of the material transformations of force within the social and political
spheres is vitiated by his unfounded faith that these apparently fixed forces spontaneously
will give rise to their own disintegration. As she explains, “Marx’s revolutionary
materialism consists in positing, on the one hand, that force alone governs social relations
to the exclusion of anything else, and, on the other hand, that one day the weak, while
remaining the weak, will nevertheless be the stronger. He believed in miracles without
believing in the supernatural.”\textsuperscript{407} Weil finds absurd Marx’s certainty in the coming
revolution which will overthrow the oppressive forces in both government and capitalist
production. She asks how it is that the elements contributing to this oppression—so
closely governed by the mechanism of material social forces—could disappear suddenly
or change so significantly and rapidly that they give rise out of their own momentum to a
revolution. Moreover, given the current state of affairs in the developed world and the
manner in which unskilled laborers are wholly at the mercy of capitalist methods of
production and the exploitative practices found in almost every industry, how can
workers become anything other than human cogs in the larger social and industrial

\textsuperscript{406} Simone Weil, \textit{Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale} (Paris: Gallimard, 1955),
22-23. All translations from this work are mine.
machine? And if laborers are indeed nothing more than cogs in the machine, asks Weil, then by what means could they possibly become at the same time the dominant class? ¹⁰⁸

It is not that Weil takes issue with Marx’s materialism; indeed, she lauds his insight that not merely physical objects and events, but also social and even psychological facts and events must be examined in terms of matter and modes of production. Her criticism lies in the unexamined messianism implicit in Marx’s notion that liberation would arrive by means of the materialist dialectic working itself out ineluctably in history. Thus it is the purely historical character of the revolution—the idea that somehow the forward sweep of history in concert with technological gains will bring about the revolution—that Weil finds so problematic in Marx’s thought, particularly since she finds in some of his work the underdeveloped and far more fruitful conception of social materialism. ¹⁰⁹ As Weil reads Marx, the evolution and improvement of productive forces, technology, and economic instrumentalities worked out in the context of class struggle will lead inevitably to a kind of paradisiacal state in which the amount of time spent working would dwindle to almost nothing and the oppressive structures of capitalism would be undone. Weil considers Marx’s materialist analysis of the state of affairs—the subjugation of the proletariat, economic exploitation, the relentless grind of labor, and the mechanism of interwoven and oppressive social forces—to be so astute and far-reaching that his postulate of a revolution arising out of

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¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Weil’s fascination with Marx’s ideas of social and psychic matter leads her to develop these ideas extensively in her own thought, about which more will be said later in this chapter. In essence, she condemns the “vulgar materialism” of Engels and Lenin, in which mind is reduced to matter, and instead praises Marx’s conception of materialism precisely because it is inconsistently materialist. Marx (as opposed to Lenin and Engels), “never regards man as being a mere part of nature, but always as being at the same time, owing to the fact that he exercises free activity, an antagonistic term vis-à-vis nature” (Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 32). Also, see Ch. 2 for an analysis of psychic matter in the context of Weil’s anthropology.
such a state of affairs is wholly unfounded. If being a revolutionary in the Marxist sense means “waiting for a future time, a fortunate catastrophe, an overturning which ushers in some part of the Gospel’s promises here on earth and which gives us a society where the last shall be first,” writes Weil, then “such a future is...if not impossible, at least entirely improbable, and I do not believe that anyone today would have solid, serious reasons for being a revolutionary in this sense.” ⁴¹⁰ To hold to such a mad belief about a future after capitalism has been ended by the revolution, along with the equally mad belief that the forces of production within history can produce such a revolution and abolish injustice and class oppression, is for Weil every bit as foolish and ill-considered as any form of religious apocalypticism or blind faith:

This religion of productive forces in the name of which generations of [capitalist] industrial chiefs have crushed the working masses without the least remorse itself serves as an oppressive element within the socialist movement. All religions make humans into simple instruments of Providence, and socialism, too, puts human beings in the service of historical progress, understood as the progress of production. ⁴¹¹

There is no reason to think that the force of history—which is, in Weil’s reading of Marx, a history of force—has the capacity to give rise to revolution or to create from within itself the conditions for the abolition of the oppression which is its hallmark. To subscribe to such a position is no more rational than a belief in the dramatic intervention of the divine within history. If Marx rejects an explicit faith in Providence or the working of the spirit as inconsistent with his doctrine of historical materialism, then Weil considers his inability to see the groundless messianism of the concept of the revolution to be a significant failure.

⁴¹¹ Weil, Réflexions, 21-22.
Perhaps even more damning for Weil is Marx’s explicit refusal to permit moral categories such as justice and injustice to have a place in his version of historical materialism, despite her view that in creating his system of thought, Marx “had no other motive than a generous aspiration to liberty and equality,” at least at the outset. Weil argues that, while he may have been motivated initially by his observations of the injustices plaguing oppressed workers, Marx’s system of historical materialism grounds revolutionary liberation in a “scientifically” verifiable set of historical movements without reference to the justice or moral goodness of the struggle of the oppressed against the conditions of their oppression. While Marx would describe the struggle as one against the oppressing class rather than the conditions of oppression, Weil sees the conditions themselves as primary and in some sense timeless, and the specifics of this or that class achieving dominance as contingent. She holds that the idea of an oppressive class “is a stupid one… One can only speak of an oppressive structure of society. This structure will never automatically give rise to its opposite [but only to the ideal of its opposite…].” Thus, Weil sees moral categories of justice and injustice, right and wrong as indispensable for the struggle. For Weil, Marx’s historical materialist concept of revolution, in which the focus is upon the grandiose yet amoral historical mission of the proletariat to liberate the forces of production, “degrades and debases this struggle. The notion that the revolution is being carried on the tide of history encourages a kind of

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412 Weil, Réflexions, 22.
413 By means of the development of social forms of existence and specialized technologies, “man escapes to a certain extent from the caprices of blind nature only by handing himself over to the no less blind caprices of the struggle for power… It would seem that man is born a slave, and that servitude is his natural condition” (Weil, “Analysis of Oppression,” Simone Weil Reader, 152).
414 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 35.
passivity in the worker.” Marx’s claim that history and the improvement of the forces of production will bring about liberation from oppression in spite of the cruel (and ever-worsening) conditions for workers makes the revolution seem less like a solution to pressing real-world problems, and more like a miraculous or chance occurrence. If it is the case that liberation will occur with a minimum of cooperation on the part of the oppressed as a result of the inevitable march of materially measurable historical forces and the scientific development of technology, then the oppressed are led to believe that “things will be easy, that they are being pushed from behind by a modern god named Progress while a modern form of providence called History does the lion’s share of the work for them.” According to Weil, belief in these “false gods” gives rise among oppressed and oppressors alike to the twin horrors of apathy and apocalypticism: the former on account of the complacent certitude that the outcome is secured in advance by the progression of history, and the latter on account of the conviction that almost anything is justified—including supposedly provisional injustices—because surely anything that furthers the cause of the worker must be a part of the materialist dialectic that will work itself out correctly (i.e. with the overthrow of capitalism) in the end.

It is precisely on this point—the implicit faith in what Weil understands as the false god of progress hidden within Marx’s historical materialist dialectic—that she

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417 Indeed, Weil argues that the socialist movement is so thoroughly tainted by this false messianism, that many of the workers take refuge in “apocalyptic reverie, or seek compensation in a working-class imperialism, which is no more to be encouraged than a national imperialism” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 53). See also *Réflexions*, 19, where she writes disparagingly of the Marxist dogma that “all progress of productive forces serves to advance humanity on the path of liberation, even if it is at the price of a provisional oppression.” This criticism becomes even sharper when she directs it at Stalin and Lenin. See, for example, her comparison between Lenin and Robespierre, and Stalin and Napoleon in Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 236.
offers a genuinely unique and important analysis of Marxism.\textsuperscript{418} It is certainly the case, she believes, that “[w]e accept material progress too readily as a gift from heaven, as something that is self-evident. We must face squarely the conditions at which cost progress is achieved.”\textsuperscript{419} Thus, the focal point of this analysis of Weil’s is the question of whether the development of productive capacities through technology\textsuperscript{420} can in fact serve as a constructive rather than a destructive force in the lives of workers and citizens and in the coming-to-be of a just political sphere. Weil finds a fundamental contradiction in Marx’s view, on the one hand, that the constant improvement of technology throughout the course of history will lead necessarily to the eventual amelioration of working conditions and the abundance of resources for all, and on the other hand, that as technologies have advanced in sophistication and efficiency, so also has the dehumanizing degradation of workers increased, such that they have been reduced to mere cogs within the larger industrial machine. According to Weil, Marx’s problem is that he fails to take seriously his own clear-sighted observations that the more complex forms of technology have in fact been the cause of an intensification of misery and oppression among workers; it is not the case, as Marx seems to think, that historical and technological development marched forward toward a liberative end in spite of a high human cost—which Marx acknowledges—along the way. Moreover, it is not even clear that the tendency for productive forces to increase and thereby lead to an eventual state of leisure and abundance is in any way supported empirically or “scientifically” (as Marx claims), since he himself asserts that, in fact, it is technological over-development which

\textsuperscript{418} See McLellan, Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist, 78.
\textsuperscript{419} Weil, Réflexions, 80.
\textsuperscript{420} It is true that Weil at times makes generalizations in her reading of Marx; in this instance, it is the case that she does not adequately distinguish between a mode of production and a technique of production, but this does not weaken the overall force of her criticism.
ultimately will lead to the overwhelmingly exploitative and top-heavy structure of capitalism that serves to bring on the revolution and topple capitalism once and for all. Weil takes issue with the fact that “Marx never explains why productive forces should tend to increase”; instead he “implicitly assumes that productive forces possess a secret virtue enabling them to overcome”\textsuperscript{421} what up to the present day has largely (though not categorically) been a correspondence between technological development and oppression rather than technological development and liberty. Weil wryly sums up Marx’s position:

\begin{quote}
The task of revolutions essentially consists in the emancipation, not of human beings, but of productive forces… In his eyes, present-day technology, once liberated from capitalist forms of economics, can right away provide human beings with sufficient leisure to permit the harmonious development of their talents, and could in time render obsolete (at least to a degree) the degrading [technological] specialization established by capitalism. Above all, the subsequent development of technology will continue daily to lighten the weight of material necessity, and consequently also the weight of social constraint, until humanity finally attains a state one might call paradisiacal, in which the most abundant production would require an insignificant effort, and the ancient curse of labor would be removed—in short, we would return to the happiness of Adam and Eve before the Fall.\textsuperscript{422}
\end{quote}

Weil acknowledges that there has indeed been a tendency in history for technology to advance and productive forces to develop. Yet this is by no means always the case, and in any event, she is unconvinced, both that the development of the productive capacity is the most fundamental force in history, such that each era can be understood in terms of the kind and level of economic productivity it manifests, and that improvements in technology will inevitably bring about an increase in leisure and abundance (even if capitalism should be overthrown).

Weil, although unwilling to rule out the possibility that new forms of technology might serve the purposes of liberating workers from the oppressive conditions in which

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{421} Weil, \textit{Oppression and Liberty}, 44.
\item \textsuperscript{422} Weil, \textit{Réflexions}, 18-19.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
they find themselves under capitalism, nevertheless remains suspicious of grand claims that the development of productive forces over history leads undeviatingly toward a new liberty from work and its implacable demands. Certainly she finds no irreproachable evidence in support of such claims, arguing instead that, “in spite of progress, man has not emerged from the servile condition in which he found himself when he was handed over weak and naked to all the blind forces that make up the universe; it is merely that the power which keeps him on his knees has been as it were transferred from inert matter to the human society of which he is a member.”\(^\text{423}\) Indeed, when she looks for instances in which technology does allow for the freedom of the worker—a freedom the characteristics of which will be addressed shortly—she does not find many examples in the contemporary industrial setting. Instead, she writes often of the dehumanizing effects upon workers of machine work and the Taylorization of labor. In reflecting on her own experience after her year of factory work, Weil writes, “I was, as it were, in pieces, body and soul… what I went through there marked me in so lasting a manner that still today when any human being, whoever he may be and in whatever circumstances, speaks to me without brutality, I cannot help having the impression that there must be a mistake.”\(^\text{424}\) Weil’s experience in the factory confirmed and even rendered darker her earlier reflections on the negative consequences of modern technology for the health and wholeness of workers. As technology raises the efficiency and sophistication of machines, the individual worker no longer has to be a skilled artisan, with a complete and thorough knowledge of the product she crafts and the tools she uses to do so. Instead it becomes a question of performing the same limited movement over and over again, such

that the worker has no thoughtful part to play in the stamping out of her particular piece of whatever larger product it is that is being mass-produced at her factory. At no point does this worker have a full picture of the completed product or of the step-by-step process by which it is fabricated; nor is she required to employ her mind in grasping the ultimate telos of her repetitive and monotonous actions. As Weil explains, this process of rationalization or Taylorization creates a “paradoxical situation: knowing that there is indeed a method in the movements of work, but not in the thought of the worker. One could say that the method has transferred the locus of its spirit into matter… And thus one finds oneself faced with the strange spectacle of machines for which the [thought-driven] method has been so perfectly concretized in metal that it seems as if it is the machines which think, and the men attached to their service who are reduced to the state of automatons.”

Weil objects strenuously to the commonplace notion that improvements in technology have led to a less onerous workday for the average unskilled laborer. Instead, the conditions are such that a foreman can demand ever-faster piecework rates and arbitrarily can order a worker to use a different machine at any point, without leaving the worker any possibility of protesting. Since the worker is merely an appendage of the machine and not the knowledgeable, skilled operator of it, her experience of the machine and of the foreman’s capriciousness is one of resigned subordination and degradation: “In such a situation the subordinate is almost like an inert object used as a tool by the intelligence of another.”

Weil goes on to explain that she herself felt this way during her time in the factories.

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425 Weil, Réflexions, 99.
Thus, she fundamentally agrees with Marx’s own view that modern technologies make of the worker a thing—an objectified extension of the machine.\textsuperscript{427} She credits Marx with the astute observation that “In the factory there exists a mechanism independent of the workers which incorporates them as living cogs… The…individual destiny of the machine worker fades into insignificance before the science, the tremendous natural forces and the collective labor which are incorporated into the machines as a whole and constitute with them the employer’s power.”\textsuperscript{428} She returns again and again throughout her writings—both in early articles written for syndicalist and other leftist journals and in texts as late as \textit{Enracinement}—to this idea of the human body enslaved, not directly to the forces of production or to the capitalist overclass, but rather, to the machines themselves. Following a visit she made to a mine in 1932 while teaching at Le Puy, Weil writes that she was struck by the fact that the body of the miner is caught at every moment between the forces of the unyielding rock face on the one hand, and the pressurized air driving the automated pickaxe on the other. While she concedes that mining has always been dangerous and physically demanding, she argues that, prior to the technological advances which created automated drills and axes, the miner would have used the pick as an extension or amplification of his own body, adapting it to his particular range of motion and to his assessment of the depth and strength that would be required to strike at the rock. In other words, his thought and action would be united in employing the tool on his own terms. Instead, because he is forced to hold the automated tool in a precisely prescribed manner over an extended period of time determined, not by his own assessment, but by the workings of the machine itself, “he forms a single body

\textsuperscript{428} Weil, \textit{Oppression and Liberty}, 41.
with the machine and is added to it like a supplementary gear, vibrating in time with its incessant shaking. This machine is not modeled on human nature… and its movements follow a rhythm profoundly alien to the rhythm of life’s movements, violently bending the human body to its service. This dynamic, according to Weil, robs the worker of the dignity and purpose that may be found in labor—however strenuous—when it is conceived as a task in which thought and action are united in the body and mind of the worker.

While it is indeed the case that Weil finds in Marx’s thought this fundamental notion of the worker serving the machine as if he is merely part of the machine, she takes Marx to task for failing to see that it is precisely this form of human subjugation to technology—and the consequent apathy and despair it produces among workers—that prevents these same workers from rising up in revolt, and that precludes technological development from automatically moving humankind toward greater liberty. Comparing the conditions in a factory to those of slavery, Weil wonders “how Marx could ever have believed that slavery could produce free men… The truth is that…slavery degrades man to the point of making him love it.” Total submission to the brutal demand for hasty and repetitive actions and to the capricious will of the foreman, as well as a constant fear of losing one’s job should one dare to complain, inculcate a passive, exhausted resignation in the worker, and make her a kind of unwilling co-conspirator in her own exploitation. Indeed, Weil goes so far as to state

430 Closely tied to Weil’s assessment of the modes of modern technology is her analysis of the totalitarian tendencies of bureaucracy. While her treatment of bureaucracy will be touched on at various points in this chapter and the next, a full exploration of the topic lies beyond the scope of the current work.
431 Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 117.
sadly her conviction that the French working class under the wretched conditions of automated factory life are so afflicted by despair and venality, that their “capacity…not only for revolution but for any action at all is almost nil.” The affliction visited upon factory workers by the intensification of technologized and rationalized labor practices is, contrary to Marx’s belief, the very last thing likely to encourage a spirit of revolt among the working class.

III. The Scientific Exploitation of Living Matter: Technology and Rationalization.

What is more, Weil goes further than Marx in her analysis of the deadening effects of modern technological innovation and automation when she insists on taking seriously—more seriously than does Marx himself—his underdetermined concept of social materiality. Observes Weil, “[t]he Marxist view, according to which social existence is determined by the relations between man and nature established by production, certainly remains the only sound basis for any historical investigation; only these relations must be considered first of all in terms of the problem of power, the means of subsistence forming simply one of the data of this problem.” By Weil’s account, Marx has wrongly merged two forms of conflict present in capitalism: that between employers who use money to buy labor and employees who sell their labor for wages, and that between those in power who use technology to control machines and those without power for whom technology operates via the machine to control them. Marx fails to see that they are two different conflicts, and that the former, which Marx names exploitation, exists only under capitalism, while the latter, which Weil calls oppression, is

432 Weil, Seventy Letters, 37.
a timeless condition that exists anywhere that power differentials exist—which is to say, it exists throughout human history. For this reason, Weil rejects Marx’s contention that economic conditions are the fundamental factors governing history; while she agrees with Marx’s materialist argument that modes of production are crucial for any understanding of human history and civilization, past and present, she insists that it is only when these modes of production are examined in light of power arrangements that any clear assessment of history can be achieved. This is the case, claims Weil, because, “although power depends on the material conditions of life, it never ceases to transform these conditions themselves.” Thus it is power—a force which is located everywhere and nowhere—that ultimately shapes the way that the material conditions of history, such as technology and productivity, play out.

Weil’s transposition of the Marxist concept of material production into her own concept of power, or social matter—a concept which she claims has its roots in Marx’s materialist doctrine even if Marx himself does little with it—is more than a simple substitution of “psychosocial categories for (Marxist) economic ones,” however. If Marx identifies the problem of workers becoming objectified extensions of the machines they operate once automated technologies come into existence during the industrial revolution, then Weil moves a step further, writing of a “second industrial revolution…

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434 See Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 151; 163.
436 See *Oppression and Liberty*, 118. Cf. McLellan, who explains, “In Weil’s scheme of things the concept of exploitation…was replaced by that of oppression, the extraction of surplus value by slavery to the machine, and the transformation of property relations by the transformation of machinery and technology. She thus concentrated on the relationship of thought to action as a means of judging modes of production rather than the criterion of productivity implicit in Marx who tended, she thought, to confuse economic and moral progress.” (*Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, 72).
defined by the scientific exploitation of living matter, that is, human beings.”

Weil’s phrase, “living matter,” suggests the dissolution of the standard psycho-ontological subject-object economy, in which consciousness and agency belong to the subject who exercises control over the object. While Weil is not, perhaps, wholly original in arguing that injustice has its foundation in the objectification of human beings by other human beings, she breaks new ground in proposing that the solid boundaries of subject and object disappear in the context of an overmastering technological force for which human flesh—converted into mechanical energy in and through the operation of the machine—is no different than a lump of coal, a sheet of metal, or a container of pressurized gas. The method by which a task is thought through and accomplished is no longer the province of a human being; instead, method has been transferred to the machine, which serves as a kind of crucible in which force is amplified and extended. As Weil explains, “The machine allows for thought to intervene [in labor] as little as possible, even at the simple level of a completed operation; rhythm is forbidden to [the worker].”

Machine and human are no longer distinguishable as object and subject respectively, but instead have become together a form of energy to be tapped in the production, not of a finished product, but of another fluid element in the vast network of the consumption and transference of resources. What new and ever more efficient forms of technology effectively have meant, according to Weil, is not merely that “[t]hings play the role of men, men the role of things,” (though that is so on one level), but that things and men—subjects and objects—are not discrete, separable entities. Rather, in a society devoted to the instrumental use of science and technology as means of maximizing profit

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438 Weil, La Condition Ouvrière, 303.
439 Ibid., 179.
440 Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 60.
and production, there is no longer any sense in which humans as subjects exercise conscious control over inert matter in order to create finished products which participate in the thought-infused human actions which brought those products into existence. Subjects and objects as distinct entities disappear into a non-teleological economy of energies, all of which can be called up and utilized at any moment for any purpose.

This economy of energies bears a striking similarity to Heidegger’s notion of “standing reserve” [Bestand], which arrives on the scene when “the monstrousness that reigns” in advanced technology gives rise to a series of endlessly and “manifoldly interlocking paths.” With the advent of modern technology,

the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew. Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing. But the revealing never simply comes to an end.

There is nothing in this series that is not a resource, or a form of energy. Nothing can be considered a finished product, and there is no sense in which a plan or a sketch can be thought out and then brought into concrete existence via labor and action. It is not that humans, prior to the development of modern technology, lacked the capacity to order the world of nature, or to draw upon it in order to satisfy their needs. Yet Heidegger observes that “the field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order appears differently than it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain… But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which sets upon nature…” Agriculture is now the mechanized food

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442 Ibid.
industry,443 and the soil and plants, sunlight and air, are all changed into standing reserve, ever at the ready to be converted into some other form in an unending cycle of resource assimilation and depletion.

According to Heidegger, the category of standing reserve brought about by the development of modern technology means that humans no longer occupy the status of autonomous subjects oriented toward the discrete objects in nature of which they make use in order to satisfy finite needs and create useful, finished products. Instead, explains Heidegger, “Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object.”444 What becomes of something which formerly might have been considered as an independent object in a subject-object economy?

[A]n airliner that stands on the runway is surely an object. Certainly. We can represent the machine so. But then it conceals itself as to what and how it is. Revealed, it stands on the taxi strip only as standing-reserve, inasmuch as it is ordered to ensure the possibility of transportation. For this it must be in its whole structure and in every one of its constituent parts, on call for duty, i.e., ready for takeoff… Seen in terms of standing-reserve, the machine is completely unautonomous, for it has its standing only from the ordering of the orderable.445

What Heidegger suggests is that the solid boundaries demarcating subjects and objects are no longer in operation when modern forms of technology construe every object, every machine, and every element as endlessly convertible. While the language of contemporary capitalism distinguishes between liquid assets—i.e. cash—and non-liquid assets such as real estate, housing, possessions, or raw materials, Heidegger’s claim is that, in such a system, everything is characterized by a certain liquidity.

Weil, too, considers modern machines in terms of energy reserves standing at the beck and call of the network of forces and desires that forms the structure of society. She

443 Ibid., 15.
444 Ibid., 17.
445 Ibid.
contrasts modern, technologically advanced machines with the tools used by skilled
workers and craftsmen: while the latter function like a blind man’s stick—adapted to
human use as a kind of material extension of the human body that offers humans a means
of making thoughtful contact with the world—the former function as concentrations of
force into which the human is assimilated. It is not only machines, however, which have
been converted into transformable and transferable stores of energy embedded in a
network of force. According to Weil, human beings themselves in a technologically
sophisticated factory setting are no different for the purposes of productivity than the
machines and energy used to power the plant. Indeed, the workers in such a setting are
reduced to “the energy which permits [them] to make a movement, the equivalent of
electrical force; and they are used exactly as one uses electricity.” Weil observes that
things and men become interchangeable and exchangeable; objects and human beings
alike are no longer separate entities, but are instead reducible to the energy stores they
represent. This reductive exchangeability is present as a tendency throughout human
history, but it is with the development of later forms of technology—a development that
nearly always has been fueled by strife and warfare—that it truly becomes demonic,
because it is in the context of modern technology that the sense of teleology has been
lost. Subject and object are dissolved into a network of power in which everyone
becomes simply a means to manipulate, transfer, or accrue power. In a discussion of the

See, for instance, Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 141.

Weil, *La Condition ouvrière*, 323.

Indeed, Weil has much to say about the ways in which technological development, warfare, and global
finance are intimately connected. She claims that, with the rise of modern technology, “War has replaced
profit as the dominant motive force” Simone Weil, *Ecrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard,
1957), 175. A full discussion of these connections lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but see Weil, *La
Condition ouvrière*, 437-440; 442-447.
oppression engendered by the war between the Trojans and the Greeks, Weil employs her concept of social matter—that is, power—in order to clarify what is at stake:

Thus in this ancient and wonderful poem there already appears the essential evil besetting humanity, the substitution of means for ends. At times war occupies the forefront, at other times the search for wealth, at other times production; but the evil remains the same... [T]he law of all activities governing social life, except in the case of primitive communities, is that here each one sacrifices human life—in himself and in others—to things which are only means to a better way of living. This sacrifice takes on various forms, but it all comes back to the question of power... [P]ower-seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize hold of its object, rules out all consideration of an end, and finally comes, through an inevitable reversal, to take the place of all ends... Human history is simply the history of the servitude which makes men—oppressors and oppressed alike—the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured.449

In a system in which all ends have been converted into means, what remains is only power itself, or social materiality in the form of energy. Humans themselves are understood, not as autonomous subjects, nor even really as discrete things objectified by other humans, but instead, as unstable reserves of energy—the channels through which power operates in history. Humans and machines equally serve as relations of power and sources of energy which may be tapped at any moment. There is no finitude, no lull in the constant shift from means to means, and no point at which the energy comes to rest in a completed product or a whole and stable self. Indeed, for Weil, the self can only be conceived of in terms of motion, since “[t]he body is always a balance for motives, a perpetual balance perpetually in motion. What we call ‘I’, ‘me’ is only a motive.”450 She asks the question: how is it that a person or a thing caught up in the nexus of power ever comes to a stop?

For Heidegger, too, it is not only machines that become part of the category of standing reserve in the context of modern technology, but humans as well. He writes of

450 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 97.
modern technology (“in accordance with which nature presents itself as a calculable complex of the effects of forces”) as a potentially quite dangerous form of revealing or “unconcealing.” When “what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but does so, rather, exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve.”

While it is certainly the case that nature is affected at the most fundamental level when modern technology “pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces,” Heidegger also observes that human beings cannot be entirely separated out from nature when it is a question of the operations of modern technology and the ways in which modern technology dissolves the subject/object economy into standing reserve. Heidegger, like Weil, argues that the feeling of some humans that they are masters of technology, and that they possess the capacity to wield it as a means of gaining power or marshalling energy, leads them to “[exalt themselves] to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct.” Once there are no longer any ends but only means (or endlessly convertible power relations, to use Weil’s language), then humans and machines become indistinguishable, despite the illusions that humans may have that it is they who manipulate power. In fact, claims Heidegger, human beings are subject to a technological being-in-the-world that they themselves have created, and so,

453 Ibid., 21.
454 Ibid., 27. In Weil’s language, “it is things, not men, that prescribe the limits and laws governing this giddy race for power. Men’s desires are powerless to control it. The masters may well dream of moderation, but they are prohibited from practicing this virtue, on pain of defeat, except to a very slight extent; so that, apart from a few almost miraculous exceptions, such as Marcus Aurelius, they quickly become incapable even of conceiving it.” Weil, “Analysis of Oppression,” Simone Weil Reader, 138-9.
too, to its concomitant drive to unconcealment via exploitation. Like Weil, he contrasts this technologically-driven, ordered form of unconcealment with those forms that were available in earlier times:

[M]an does not have control over unconcealment itself, in which at any given time the real shows itself or withdraws… Only to the extent that man for his part is already challenged to exploit the energies of nature can this ordering revealing happen. If man is challenged, ordered, to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve? The current talk about human resources…gives evidence of this. The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines. The latter, in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed, so that a set configuration of opinion becomes available on demand.\(^{455}\)

Human resources, then, are no different at bottom from the plant resources used to manufacture paper. And in a fascinating move that follows Weil’s own schema, Heidegger emphasizes the convertibility of what we (and Marx) classically think of as material resources—namely, trees and paper—with both the human materiality (or energy)\(^{456}\) that is used in the harvesting of trees and mass-production of paper on the one hand, and the social materiality of the collective opinion which is steered in this or that direction by the media, on the other.

\(^{456}\) Of course, it is the case that Marx himself sees human beings as “natural resources” to some degree, insofar as he posits labor as a resource that may be bought, sold, and traded. Where Weil moves beyond Marx is in her development of an economy of energetics, which is in keeping with her belief that Marx underestimates the power of capitalist exploitation and its concomitant social and psychological consequences to scar the whole human being, body and soul. For Weil, it is not only labor as a commodity which can serve as a resource within a technologically-driven capitalist system, but also the psychic and physical human energies themselves which are stored up, expended in labor or attention, and thereby transformed into other materials—materials which are themselves merely others kinds of storehouses (or means) for energy. Weil observes that, “In the case of inert matter, a moving body comes to a stop through degradation of mechanical energy into calorific energy. In the case of man, apparently, transformation of energy in the reverse sense” (Weil, *Notebooks*, vol. 1, 97).
For Weil as for Heidegger, this situation may indeed be “a necessity of social life,” but if so, “this necessity has nothing providential about it.” Heidegger calls this form of technological ordering “the supreme danger.” For both thinkers, the consequences of living as a power relation or energy resource in the midst of the network of forces are manifold, but one of the principal effects which both Weil and Heidegger discuss is a form of deracination or uprootedness (to employ Weil’s terms). According to Heidegger, from the earliest times, technology has been “a mode of revealing.” In an analysis of the Pre-Socratic use of the word technē, Heidegger observes that technē “is a mode of alētheuein. It reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us… Whoever builds a house or a ship or forges a sacrificial chalice reveals what is to be brought forth… Thus what is decisive in technē does not lie at all in making and manipulating nor in the using of means, but rather in the aforementioned revealing. It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that technē is a bringing-forth.”

In this respect, claims Heidegger, we must understand technē as a form of poiēsis, a bringing-forth that shepherds what is not (yet) present into presence. Modern technology is also a mode of revealing, but it is a mode that has significantly more attendant risks and complexities than earlier ways of revealing; moreover, while it may

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458 Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 26. It should be noted that this is not the same danger from technology feared by the earlier Heidegger, who held that the danger of modern technology was that human beings used it as a means to dominate and exploit nature and other human beings for their own fulfillment, “as if man were a subject in control and the objectification of everything were the problem” (from Hubert L. Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa, “Highway Bridges and Feasts: Heidegger and Bormann on How to Affirm Technology,” Man and World, v. 30, no. 2 [1997], 159). By the time he wrote “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger had come to realize that the subject/object distinction no longer holds true in the face of technological sophistication, and thus he began developing a reading of modern technology that was less categorically hostile and generally more nuanced than his earlier interpretations.
459 Ibid., 13.
460 Ibid.
461 Ibid.
still be a way of revealing what is to be brought forth, this revealing belongs not to the
category of *poiēsis*, but rather, to the category of “challenging, which puts to nature the
unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such.”\(^{462}\)
That is, the revealing of modern technology does not possess the same characteristic of
the human being called to work in concert with nature in order to reveal what must be
brought forth.

Instead, modern technology has an underlying aggressive stance toward nature
and humans; it sets upon and “challenges forth the energies of nature…in that it unlocks
and exposes. Yet that…is always itself directed from the beginning toward furthering
something else.”\(^{463}\) Here again we find Heidegger’s claim that modern technology,
which transmutes everything and everyone into standing reserve, effects the increasingly
fluid and efficient ordering of resources, not in order to craft concretized objects which
fulfill our wishes and desires, but merely for the sake of ordering, transferring, and re-
ordering resources. According to Heidegger, this endless transmission and conversion of
energies runs the risk of disorienting human beings so thoroughly that they completely
miss the process of unconcealment that lies at the root of even modern forms of
technology. As Heidegger explains, the challenging-forth of modern technology
threatens to obscure other forms of revealing, so that the continuous, non-teleological
ordering of standing reserve appears to be the only category that exists. “Where this
ordering holds sway,” notes Heidegger, “it drives out every other possibility of revealing.
Above all, [it] conceals that revealing which, in the sense of *poiēsis*, lets what presences
come forth into appearance… Thus the challenging [of modern technology] not only

\(^{462}\) Ibid., 14.  
\(^{463}\) Ibid., 15.
conceals a former way of revealing, bringing-forth, but it conceals revealing itself and with it That wherein unconcealment, i.e. truth, comes to pass. When this takes place, then human beings are threatened with the loss of a mode of being-in-the-world in which they are capable of recognizing themselves and others as anything more than standing-reserve. What ensues is a kind of deracination on account of which human beings become unable to encounter reality in any meaningful way, and are instead rootlessly caught up as standing reserve in practices that lack finite ends.

For Weil, as well, the conditions engendered by the rise of modern technology contribute to a general feeling of despair and uprootedness. Arguing that “[w]hoever is uprooted himself uproots others,” Weil insists that at the center of present-day deracination is the suffering and disorientation caused by modern technology and the oppression that it creates for worker and capitalist alike. It is no accident that, at the outset of an extended discussion of rootlessness in the modern world, Weil launches into an analysis of the malaise of the working class and the difficulty of mitigating rootlessness in the face of dehumanizing modern technology. Like Heidegger, Weil sees a danger in the way that technologies allow for ever-increasing exploitation of nature; she seeks to debunk the heady illusion that this exploitation is limitless, and argues that there will come a time when the only thing that remains is to convert and transform ever-diminishing energy resources in order to power increasingly voracious forms of technology. In particular, Weil holds that the rootlessness of a working class that has become enslaved to technology leads to the political rootlessness of entire

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464 Ibid., 27.
466 See Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 50-60.
nations. The connection between technologically-driven exploitation and political uprootedness comes in part from the fact that “the workers’ natural and instinctive reactions of indignation are stifled and suppressed, leading to inertia and passivity. Under normal circumstances, they would complain about [ill] treatment, but here they don’t, with the result that ordinary responses to injustice are gradually eroded.”

Human beings in such situations become so thoroughly accustomed to being reduced to the status of inert matter or energy resources that their capacity for recognizing injustice—either in their circumstances or in those of their fellow workers—is stunted. In the case of France, degraded workers who have been reduced to the status of power relations or energy resources used to transform this material into that material limit their political activity to more or less successful attempts to gain paltry wage augmentations or to vote into office someone marginally more friendly to the rights of laborers. But Weil asks, “What is the use of workmen obtaining as a result of their [political] struggles an increase in wages and a relaxation of discipline, if meanwhile engineers in a few research departments invent, without the slightest evil intent, machines which reduce their souls and bodies to a state of exhaustion, or aggravate their economic difficulties?”

Writing *The Need for Roots* in 1943 in the midst of the Vichy regime, she observes that, among all the desperate speculations offered by the French to explain the collapse of France, one of the most common is that it somehow had to do with modern technology: “Everybody is busy repeating, in slightly different terms, that what we suffer from is a lack of balance, due to a purely material development of technical science.”

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470 Ibid., 98.
particular good—to engage in poïësis, as Heidegger calls it—has been dissolved into the network of power for which the only goal is a constant transferal of energy and a continuous exploitation of inert, psychic, and social matter. Such human beings cannot be rooted in any kind of politically engaged being-in-the-world, and in fact, this is precisely the situation Weil observes during her time working in factories: “Since I have been here not one single time have I heard anyone talk about social problems, neither about the trade unions nor about the parties… I asked a worker if there really was a trade union section in the factory; all I got in reply was a shrug of his shoulders and a knowing smile… Solidarity is largely lacking.”

The pressing question for both Heidegger and Weil, then, is whether a different kind of technological development is possible that would thwart the dissolution of human beings into mere power relations. To use Heidegger’s idiom, “if there were a way that technological devices could…gather us, then one could be drawn into a positive relationship with them without becoming a resource engaged in this disaggregation and reaggregation of things and oneself and thereby losing one’s nature as a discloser” of the real. For her part, Weil considers political reform impossible without a “transformation in the very conception of technical research.” Instead of designing machines with the “double objective” of increasing profits and stimulating consumer interest—that is, making more and making it more cheaply—Weil holds that machines should be designed with the worker in mind. In the present system, machines are constructed in ways that maximize fluidity and transferability of capital, of goods, services, and products, and of energy (whether it is the energy derived from fuel

471 Pétrement, Simone Weil: A Life, 235.
473 Weil, The Need for Roots, 56.
resources used to run industries, or human energy that is absorbed into the production process).

Thus, the dangers of extremely sophisticated technology are many; yet Weil still maintains, not only that technological innovations could (and already did) mitigate much painful and tedious drudgery for human beings, but also that it could be developed in such a way that it might provide a technical foundation for the kinds of labor reforms she makes central to her political vision. For both Heidegger and Weil, the potential for technology to gather instead of dispersing, to render human instead of dehumanizing, depends upon whether or not it can be brought into alignment with attention (to use Weil’s term). Heidegger, arguing that modern technology contains within its essence, not only danger, but also “the growth of the saving power,” draws upon the Greek idea of technē as a form of poiēsis, and uses this link as a means of bringing technology closer to the realm of art, which is an important mode of revealing. While reflection upon and contemplation of art is today separated from technology, Heidegger seeks to retrieve the ethos of a time when “art was simply called technē… [b]ecause it was a revealing that brought forth and hither, and therefore belonged within poiēsis.” What Heidegger seems to suggest is that contemplation and action must be united in a new understanding of technē. He observes that among the Greeks, bios praktikos (a life of “action and productivity”) and bios theōrētikos (“the life of beholding”) were not as far apart as we moderns are likely to think, since “for the Greeks, bios theōrētikos… is, especially in its purest form as thinking, the highest doing.” Like Heidegger, who wishes to bring reflection together with action in the context of technology in order to redeem technology

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475 Ibid., 34.
for a new age.\textsuperscript{477} Weil, too, sees the necessity of reimagining technology in terms of the unification of thought and action. Indeed, she writes, “Total ignorance of the end toward which one is working is highly demoralizing. One lacks the sense that a \textit{product} results from the efforts one puts forth.”\textsuperscript{478} For Weil, it is the case that, in spite of the apparent progress humans have made when it comes to the control and manipulation of nature by means of technology, in fact, most workers are not at bottom any better off than in earlier ages, when the threat of famine and other natural disasters always loomed large. No matter how fettered by natural constraints and hazards workers may have been in the times preceding the development of advanced technologies, they “could at least try to think things out, to combine and innovate at [their] own risk, a liberty which is absolutely denied to a worker engaged in a production line.”\textsuperscript{479} Like Heidegger, who “sees technology as disaggregating our identities into contingently built up collections of skills”\textsuperscript{480} unless the actions we take are somehow brought into focus by our becoming “attentive to the essence of technology,”\textsuperscript{481} Weil maintains that simply shifting the ownership of the modes of production will not suffice to change the dehumanizing network of power relations to which workers and capitalists alike are subject. Instead, the very nature of the relationship between worker and machine, worker and factory, must be altered so as to restore to the laborer the capacity of attentive activity that modern machine technology had eradicated.\textsuperscript{482}

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\textsuperscript{477} Ibid., 162-5.
\textsuperscript{478} Weil, \textit{La Condition ouvrière}, 204.
\textsuperscript{480} Dreyfus and Spinosa, “Highway Bridges and Feasts,” 9.
\textsuperscript{482} See Weil, \textit{La Condition ouvrière}, 253.
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Both Weil and Heidegger are wary of the way that technological advances have led to the non-teleological transferability of humans as resources; for both thinkers, the dissolution of the subject into pure relationality—as standing reserve in Heidegger’s idiom, or power in Weil’s—poses a threat to genuine, engaged community and political life. Yet both also hold out hope that technology can be redeemed by means of a reunification of thought and action, and a reimagining of the essence of technology itself and the relationship between technology and human beings. Weil deviates from Heidegger in two significant ways, however. Heidegger seeks to reimagine and redeem technology in order to reclaim our mode of being as world disclosers and revealers—a mode which is hidden from us when we have become part of standing reserve. For Heidegger, then, the “saving power” of technology lies in its ability to recall human beings to their essential identities as world disclosers. Because technology is a new mode of revealing that is characterized by constant change, it may not be a question of a stable, singular, or universal identity. Nevertheless, even if it is an identity which is principally identifiable by its “openness to dwelling in many worlds and the capacity to move among them,” the focus for Heidegger is on finding a “genuinely positive relationship to technological things” which allows humans to resist the endless transferability into standing reserve. The danger of modern forms of technology, for Heidegger, is that they tend to disaggregate our identities and strip us of the ability to be fully human, with all that our humanity entails: thinking, feeling, acting, willing.

Weil identifies a similar danger: the laborer

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484 Dreyfus and Spinosa, “Highway Bridges and Feasts,” 11.
485 Ibid., 9.
expends...what is best in him, his capacity to think, feel, be moved. He squanders it all, since he leaves the plant emptied; and yet he has put nothing of himself in his work, neither thought, feelings, nor even...movements determined by him, ordered to some end... The [worker], though indispensable in the productive process, is accounted as practically nothing in it. 486

Indeed, each worker is entirely replaceable and utterly indistinguishable, since she is simply a part of the machine that is less important than the machine itself: the worker can easily be replaced by another, while a costly machine requires attention and expense if it should break. The worker in the context of modern technology has no cause to think or to act with intention, and serves only as an energy source for the machines. Yet Weil’s hope for the possibilities offered by modern technology is not centered on the recuperation of identity or the reclaiming of a stable self. On the contrary: Weil is indeed horrified by the self-destroying consequences of modern technology for the worker, yet the goal of her reimagined relationship between technology and the worker is not to reaggregate the self, but rather, to empty the self in a decreative manner. The problem for Weil is not simply that a stable identity has been dissolved into pure power relations on account of the destructive effects of modern technology, since any sense of a self-contained, autonomous ego is an illusion in any event. The problem is that the effects of modern technology are such that they deny to the worker the possibility of recognizing and consenting to her authentic status as a purely relational non-self, either because they encourage in the laborer the kind of bitter wretchedness that leads to petty self-assertion or a vindictive competitiveness with fellow workers, or because they cause a deep despair and crippling apathy. It is not that modern technology must be reconsidered in terms of its ability to refocus the identity of human beings, but rather, that it must be developed in such a way that it enables the decreation of the self, and not its destruction. For Weil, the

network of endlessly transferable power relations fostered by modern technology and the social and political structures it perpetuates is simply a mark of the operation of necessity in the world. To be sure, she holds that its weight was in some ways more bearable in pre-technological times, and that modern technology is the driving force behind the total and annihilating reduction of human beings to power relations within the network of necessity. Yet ultimately, for Weil, the goal of a redeemed form of technology—technology that fosters the workers’ capacity for thought-infused action and a sense of connection to the complete and finished product—is in fact to allow the worker to achieve the self-forgetfulness and self-emptying that is a sign of decreation. Like the late Heidegger, Weil’s “vision was not anti-technological, but called for a responsible development of technology, in such a way that the worker could understand the process, as opposed to being a blind operator.” Only this kind of work, and not the body-destroying and soul-extinguishing work performed in and through modern forms of technology, possesses the capacity to dissolve the spuriously autonomous ego and nurture the small and fragile possibility for consent to decreation.

While it is the case that Weil’s vision of a renewed relationship to technology is geared toward the decreative dissolution of identity and not toward a Heideggerian recuperation of identity as a mode of world-disclosive being, the question remains: in what way can a new form of technology that permits thought-infused action on the part of the worker actually foster the conditions germane to decreation? It is in answering this question that Weil’s second major difference from Heidegger becomes clear. For Heidegger the most important task in contending properly with technology is to think, 487

since “thinking is genuine activity, genuine taking a hand.” Obtaining the proper relationship to technology—a relationship in which the essence of technology can be understood rightly as a novel mode of revealing connected to *poiēsis* in the way it once was—has to do with attending to technology as a mode of revealing. This attending is itself a form of activity, according to Heidegger: indeed, the highest form of activity. Thus, for Heidegger, the unity of action and thought in the context of technology can be brought about only because thinking is considered the highest and most important form of action. For Weil, this is not an adequate solution to the problems presented by modern technology, since it effectively perpetuates and reinforces the despicable inequality Marx recognizes between manual and intellectual labor, which she thinks lies at the heart of the particular oppressive and dehumanizing practices that result from modern technologies. According to Weil, thought and action cannot be united merely by naming them both as forms of work and then privileging the intellectual over the manual form. Instead, manual and intellectual labor—and the technologies with which they are connected—find their point of unification in her concept of attention. Attention for Weil is not, however, reducible to thinking or reflecting. Attention requires an element of materiality in order to be brought to bear in the world, since “Material objects [are] transformers of energy. We bestow on them our energy and they give it back to us in either a regraded or degraded form.” In order to become capable of consenting to the process of decreation and acknowledging the illusory nature of the expansive and substantial self, human beings must be able to encounter necessity and understand themselves as nothing other than relation, as wholly dissolved into the network of forces that govern and structure the

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world. By means of attention, thought and action come together in such a way that the human being—*homo laborans*—may encounter necessity in a decreative and not a destructive fashion: “The mind makes a tool of the matter which would crush it. It is in so far as man controls nature, whether he does this really, or whether he does it by the use of signs, that he has the notion of necessity. For there to be necessity, there must be encounter, there must be two elements: the world and man (mind)... All human progress consists in changing constraint into an obstacle.” 490 Only if technology can be reimagined in order to allow for the presence of attention in labor—the unification of mentality and materiality, thought and action—can such a decreative encounter with necessity be made possible.

CHAPTER 5:
ATTENTION AS ANARCHISM:
NON-ACTING ACTION AND THE MYSTICAL-POLITICAL

I. Weil’s Labor Politics and Mysticism of Work: Convergence or Confusion?

Just as the previous chapter concluded with an appreciation of the importance for Weil of attention as the unity of thought and action, the present chapter begins with an emphasis on the centrality of attention in Weil’s concept of decreation. Attention, according to Weil, constitutes a kind of “non-acting action,” in which the body and the intellect together encounter and consent to necessity in the form of matter (social, psychological or inert). Whether the union of person and thing in decreation comes about via affliction, the contemplation of beauty, or labor, attention is always at the heart of this process, since it serves as the means by which the falsely substantial ego is dethroned and the purely relational (non)self is allowed to come into being. In the case of labor, attention’s status as non-acting action becomes particularly apparent:

To labor is to place one’s own being, body and soul, in the circuit of inert matter, turn it into an intermediary between one state and another of a fragment of matter, make of it an instrument. The laborer turns his body and soul into an appendix of the tool which he handles. The movements of the body and the concentration of the mind are a function of the requirements of the tool, which itself is adapted to the matter being worked upon… Man gives himself to the world in the form of labor.\textsuperscript{491}

At first glance this depiction of labor, in which the worker as subject is dissolved into the circuit of energy involved in production, appears no different than the destructive form of

\textsuperscript{491} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}, 300.
technology-driven labor Weil condemns. Yet the work that Weil describes in this instance is work in which the unification of thought and action allows for the decreative (rather than the destructive) dissolution of subjectivity. It is not necessarily that the work in this latter case is less arduous or burdensome, since all physical labor (and even some forms of intellectual labor) Weil calls “a daily death.” Rather, it is that, in the case of the kind of labor Weil here portrays, the worker is free to bring together his bodily movements and his capacity for thought in order to attend to the matter he is shaping and the tool he is using. When modern technology removes from the worker all possibility of bringing the mind to bear on a task that involves an encounter between the body and inert matter, it “does violence to human nature” and creates a situation in which the worker feels only loathing for his work, and “an attitude of revolt” instead of an attitude of consenting attention.

For this reason, Weil in her discussion of labor wholeheartedly agrees with Marx’s condemnation of “the degrading division of labor into manual and intellectual labor.” Indeed, she considers this assessment to be one of Marx’s greatest contributions to philosophy. Nevertheless, she takes issue with Marx’s claim that revolution will dissolve this division, arguing that such a claim amounts to an unexamined faith that the spontaneous movement in the direction of perfection which properly belongs to spirit will somehow arise out of a thoroughgoing Marxist materialism. She offers instead her own vision of contemplative action—non-acting action—in order to serve as a means of

492 Ibid.
493 Ibid., 301.
494 Weil is quoting Marx. Weil, Réflexions, 16.
495 Weil writes that, in his effort to overturn and thereby rectify the Hegelian dialectic, “[Marx] substituted matter for spirit as the engine of history; but by an extraordinary paradox, he conceived of history on the basis of this rectification as if he could attribute to matter what is the very essence of spirit, [namely] a perpetual aspiration toward perfection.” Simone Weil, Réflexions, 21.
redeeming the suffering that is intrinsically a part of labor. Non-acting action has the capacity to bring about the process necessary for the emergence of the transparent relational (non)self: a decreated selfhood that becomes the lynchpin of her mystical-political schema. Weil’s treatment of labor certainly owes a debt to the Marxian theory which forms such a substantial part of her intellectual background; however, the creative and idiosyncratic manner in which she develops the concepts of non-acting action and attention vis-à-vis labor, and her outline of the kind of communities, polities, and industries which might come into being on the basis of this renewed vision of labor, taken together reveal certain similarities with the anarchist tradition, and in particular Proudhon and Tolstoy. It will be important at this point to ask whether Weil’s notions of labor, non-acting action, and the decreative process they spur are robust enough concepts to serve as the necessary (if not wholly sufficient) foundation stones for the kind of just and humane mystical-political individuals and structures that she envisions. Moreover, in likening Weil’s thought on these issues to certain spiritually-inflected anarchist projects such as those of Proudhon and Tolstoy, it will be necessary to contend honestly with criticisms of Weil’s so-called “anti-politics”, and to ask how her “utopian pessimism” in fact strikes a genuine balance between a utopianism that is adequately realistic in its scope and concrete propositions, and a pessimism that, while dealing with the hard facts of the modern political landscape, nevertheless manages to sketch the outlines of a hope that is both substantial and grounded in reality.

In addressing these concerns, we will be drawn unavoidably into a new problematic: that of the convergence of the mystical and the political and the matter of whether Weil naively confuses the former for the latter, and whether Weil’s decreated,
relational individual can in fact anchor the kind of political life that she hopes will be possible (and yet fears may not be). Of importance here are a number of issues: Weil’s intense suspicion of collectivities and whether the extent of this suspicion precludes her genuine elaboration of a political theory; her seeming affinity for certain notions that intimate a kind of reactionary nostalgia and the potential obstacles such a nostalgia presents for the development of a vigorous democratic political theory which seeks to ameliorate injustice, oppression and terror; and finally, the convertibility or at least the connection between an ethical mysticism and a just and democratic political life.

Hannah Arendt appears to be a natural interlocutor for Weil on these issues, as, indeed, many other scholars—perhaps chief among them Mary Dietz and Andrea Nye—have noted. Arendt and Weil, in addition to being born within three years of each other into families of secular, assimilated European Jews, have much in common intellectually, whether it is their critical treatment of the concept of revolution, their engagement with the ancient Greeks, the astute analyses each woman provides of the propagandistic degeneration of language and the problem of collective opinions, the central role both give to freedom and to thinking, or the critiques both offer of technology and bureaucracy. For Arendt and Weil alike, the principal task of political theory is to navigate a middle way between a Marxism corrupted by violence and bureaucracy on the one hand, and a liberal democratic tradition given over to execrably profit-driven capitalism on the other. Both thinkers did this, as Nye observes, “not by grafting on to either Marxism or democratic theory another theory—of patriarchy, psychoanalysis, discourse, or culture—but by submitting social theory to present experience and to
judgments from the larger perspective of the history of the West.” However, Arendt’s concepts of the public space and intersubjectivity—prerequisites for political life and for the free action of individuals in concert with one another—seem at first to be inimical to Weil, for whom mistrust of collective actions and opinions runs deep. Indeed, Mary Dietz argues that Arendt’s depiction of the political life provides a foil for Weil’s own political thought, such that one “can immediately see that a major problem with Weil’s conception of liberty is that it is not attentive enough to the sort of politics and intersubjectivity Arendt wants to promote.” It is in contrasting Weil’s political work with that of Arendt, claims Dietz, that one realizes the extent to which Weil’s theories are “informed by one particular human activity, labor, and are thus singularly devoid of any political references to democracy, citizenship, participation, or self-government.” In this chapter I argue, however, that it is precisely Weil’s creative analysis and development of the category of labor that permits her to craft a vision of political life in which all these elements are included. This vision, focused upon the way in which labor can function as an anchor of human participation within communities and public spaces, is a vision that Weil explicitly understands both in terms of an unattainable regulative ideal and a set of practical proposals drawn from lived human experience and sober political realities. Indeed, it is largely in the context of her reflections on labor that she crafts a political idiom emphasizing obligations over and above rights, and shifts her relational anthropology—with its overtly christomorphic and ethical-mystical inflections—squarely into the domain of the political.

498 Ibid.
II. Consenting to Necessity: Labor, Attention, and Affliction

Weil’s notion that human beings give themselves to the world in the form of labor appears throughout both her early and late work.\textsuperscript{499} What this means for Weil is that, when one is intent upon completing a task, solving a problem, or fashioning a particular object, one is able to think only of the task itself and the movements one must make in order to accomplish it. When a worker is able to attend to the task at hand in a way that unites mind and body and culminates in a series of actions, then she is no longer thinking of herself, or her desires, or the accolades or remuneration she stands to gain when she completes the task. Instead, she is intent on achieving her end without, however, wishing to put her own egoist mark upon it. What is more, the task has a finite end\textsuperscript{500} that can be measured on a human scale, unlike the products churned out in modern industry, “in which nothing is made to man’s measure.”\textsuperscript{501} Weil sees labor undertaken under the proper conditions as a set of actions governed and linked by the mind, and having no direct, unmediated relation to the emotions or even the completed goal, except insofar as the goal forms part of the mind’s plan. To be detached from the fruits of one’s labor in this way is to permit the “wrenching away of what each [person] calls ‘I’,”\textsuperscript{502} since it means that the self is no longer invested in maintaining its domination of either the intermediaries—tools and matter—that are used to reach the goal, or of the end result itself. The worker encounters the external world—necessity—through work, and


\textsuperscript{500} Such finite, measurable ends serve as \textit{metaxu}: “[I]ntermediaries leading from one [created thing] to the other… intermediaries leading to God… [T]hose relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a \textit{human} life is not possible” (Weil, “Metaxu,” \textit{Simone Weil Reader}, 364-5).


\textsuperscript{502} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}, 301.
intentionally aligns her body’s movements with the changes made in the material that is being worked. This alignment, which unifies thought and action in contact with matter, serves as a kind of consent to necessity. This consent is, for Weil, the locus of human freedom: “We are free only if our action exercises perfect control over matter, and that is achieved only to the extent to which it is assimilated into it.”

Such an assimilation, properly achieved in and through labor, elicits the attention of the worker for the world and for the material at hand; when the attention is fully engaged, there is no room for the grasping ego to assert itself. Thus, Weil writes, “the changes produced by me are without affinity for my desires and my plans; they do not bear the stamp of my will and are made as they would be made if they were produced by another cause.” Labor takes place in space and time, thereby bringing the worker into contact with the order of the world, and underscoring the worker’s subjection to necessity. According to Weil, “The secret of the human condition is that equilibrium between man and the surrounding forces of nature ‘which infinitely surpass him’ cannot be achieved by inaction; it is only achieved… by work.” So long as one is detached from the fruits of one’s labor, then labor serves as a mode of encounter with necessity—a way of giving oneself to the world—which lays the groundwork for the possibility of decreation.

Weil’s writings on labor prior to her factory experience tend to emphasize the rationality and dignity of labor and the workplace as a site where “harshly, painfully, but

505 “Contrary to instinctive, capricious, or impassioned action, in work there is no place for the immediate; there is an object to attain, implying a series of acts to accomplish in duration. All activity strictly speaking implies a like succession of moments, gathered into a plan by a firm intention; activity is always labor. Moreover, this active unity is the form of my continuity; I exist only while laboring, because otherwise there is no other link between the successive moments of my self” (Vetö, The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil, 133).
506 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 18.
all the same joyfully one comes up against real life.”

The decreative possibilities of labor arise in this context because labor allows for the unity of thinking and acting, thereby fostering the self-forgetfulness and detachment from desired objects that are essential components of decreation. After her first-hand encounter with the grim and dehumanizing labor conditions in the factories in which she worked, however, Weil comes to realize more fully the extent to which the unity of thought and action in labor is absent, not only in contemporary work, but in much of our daily existence. Although she continues to believe that human beings are born for liberty—a concept she eventually expresses in terms of the continual expectation despite all evidence to the contrary that “good and not evil will be done to [one]” she recognizes that a sense of this birthright can be “radically destroyed” by the “daily experience of brutal constraint.”

It is partly her own inability to sustain a sense of worth and freedom in the face of the brutality she encounters in the factories that leads her in some of her later work “to a much deeper grasp of the interrelationship between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ of a person’s sense of self and the social relations of power and subordination he or she lives out.” Thus, while labor remains throughout her thought a singularly significant means by which decreation may be accomplished, by the time of The Need for Roots she understands labor as it actually functions in the contemporary world to be closer in character to affliction (the other principal means of decreating the self) and calls it practice for dying. Weil recognizes that there is labor as it actually is, and labor as it ought to be. Both offer human beings the conditions for the possibility of decreation through material contact.


Weil, Seventy Letters, 21.

Blum and Seidler, A Truer Liberty, 178.
with necessity, although the latter is characterized by a joyful and attentive (if exhausting) self-forgetfulness, while the former is characterized by something like affliction, to which one does or does not choose to consent.

Nevertheless, Weil refuses to abandon the hope that a just and proper form of work—with concomitantly just and measured forms of technology—can be developed as part of the social, economic, and political reforms required to renew a western culture threatened by violence, war, and endemic injustice. At the center of this issue for Weil is Marx’s condemnation of the separation of manual and intellectual labor and more broadly of professional specialization, not only in the sphere of labor, but also in the culture more generally. Moving beyond Marx, however, Weil holds that this separation and specialization have a doubly damaging effect on culture. To begin with, they contribute to the degradation of manual labor and manual laborers by a mystification of intellectual labor and an inflated prestige attached to the ability to handle language and symbols. While Weil acknowledges the indispensability of this capacity for the development of human culture, she deplores the fact that it has been kept from manual laborers, and she argues that it must be made available to everyone if the inequality between physical and intellectual labor is to be rectified: “[I]t is not by inspiring them with contempt for culture, described as…bourgeois, that the workers can be freed from the intellectuals’ domination. Certainly this superiority accorded up until now to intellectuals over producers…must now be rejected by the workers. Yet this does not mean that the workers must reject the heritage of human culture; it means that they must prepare to take possession of it.”

Or, perhaps more succinctly, “The people need poetry as much as

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511 Pétrement, Simone Weil: A Life, 88.
they need bread.” Returning frequently to the image of the superior, fluent magistrate imposing a penalty upon the tongue-tied, uneducated petty criminal, Weil seeks, not to diminish the importance of intellectual labor, but rather, to oppose its elitist separation from physical labor and to find ways of integrating the two so that manual labor once more becomes the occasion for a unity of thought and action, and intellectual labor draws closer to manual labor in offering contact with necessity via attention. The second problem resulting from separation and specialization of labor is related to the first, and infects culture as a whole. Not only does the gulf between manual and intellectual labor degrade manual laborers and deny them access to the beauty and meaning found in art, language, and reason, it also engenders ever greater technical specialization, which has become the paradigmatic characteristic of all of western culture. The separation and specialization of labor have led, Weil thinks, to bureaucracy: “The whole of our civilization is founded on specialization, which implies the enslavement of those who execute through those who coordinate.” As technological sophistication increases, the divide between those who design, own, and control the machines and the means of production, and those who serve as slaves of and energy resources for the machines and the means of production grows ever larger. What is more, the ability of any single person to devise, understand, and implement a plan for the production of a particular product or service diminishes in proportion to the growth in size and complexity of a productive force or site. Explains Weil,

In almost all fields, the individual, shut up within the bounds of a limited proficiency, finds himself caught up in a whole which is beyond him, by which he must regulate all his activity, and whose functioning he is unable to understand. In such a situation, there is one function which takes on a supreme

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512 Weil, La Condition ouvrière, 424.
513 Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 42.
importance, namely, that which consists simply in co-ordinating; we may call it the administrative or bureaucratic function. 514 Specialization and the hierarchized separation of manual and intellectual labor lead inevitably to a bureaucratic and technocratic form of organization whose vast size, unwieldy structure, and lack of transparency threaten those aspects of labor that allow it to be a source of both rootedness and decreation.

According to Weil, the integration and equalization of manual and intellectual labor, and the eradication of bureaucratic and technocratic socio-economic structures are necessary steps toward a social and political life that fosters roots and offers individuals the opportunity to be decreated via labor. Only if these steps are taken can work begin to become what it ought to be: the cornerstone of a just community. She writes, “Our age has its own particular mission, or vocation—the creation of a civilization founded upon the spiritual nature of work.” 515 Work serves simultaneously as a spiritual and a political category, and while she includes both intellectual and manual labor under the category of work, for her there can be no substitute for engaging in manual labor. “The most fully human civilization would be that which had manual labor as its pivot, that in which manual labor constituted the supreme value.” 516 It is not that she thinks those who engage in intellectual labor ought to be subservient or inferior to manual laborers (in a mere reversal of the social prestige attaching to intellectual labor); rather, in The Need for Roots she calls for intellectuals to spend time performing physical labor, either in factories or on farms, as well as for manual laborers to attend classes in which they might learn geometry, poetry, classical tragedy, and philosophy. The goal is to ensure that

514 Ibid., 13.
515 Weil, The Need for Roots, 96.
516 Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 103.
everyone is able to engage in work that allows for the joyful self-forgetfulness and physical pain and exhaustion that together pave the way for decreation. The situation of most unskilled laborers, for whom work is an occasion of dull monotony coupled with constant anxiety about speed, mechanical dangers, and punishment, gives rise to an affliction that may lead to decreation, but is far more likely to lead to destructive, despairing resignation and petty wretchedness.

As an example of the difference between labor as it is and labor as it ought to be, Weil presents the picture of

A happy young woman, expecting her first child, and busy sewing a layette; she thinks about sewing it properly. But she never forgets for an instant the child she is carrying inside her. At precisely the same moment, somewhere in a prison workshop, a female convict is also sewing, thinking, too, about sewing properly, for she is afraid of being punished. One might imagine both women to be doing the same work at the same time, and having their attention absorbed by the same technical difficulties. And yet a whole gulf of difference lies between one occupation and the other. The whole social problem consists in making the workers pass from one to the other of these two occupational extremes.517

It is not that the nature of the work itself has changed; the physical tedium and the experience of tensed and sore hands and shoulders after a day spent sewing are the same for both the convict and the expectant mother. Yet the latter worker is able to make of her work a thoughtful implementation of the series of actions needed to complete the layette for a purpose which motivates her intrinsically, while the former is sewing hastily and thoughtlessly from a pattern that is not her own, and for the ignoble and extrinsic purpose of avoiding further pain and punishment. In the case of the expectant mother, the pain of the manual labor she undertakes—a pain that Weil calls the trade entering one’s body518 or the experience of “[T]ime entering into the body”519—is a pain in which

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517 Weil, The Need for Roots, 95.
518 Weil, Waiting for God, 131.
519 Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 78.
thought and action are unified, and through which she is able to encounter the reality of necessity in her struggle with materiality and its constraints. The convict also encounters necessity in and through her work, but it is necessity experienced as a “spur” that “pricks [her] on from outside… it is in this that the contrast between servitude and liberty lies.”

It is never a question for Weil of making the need for labor disappear; rather, it is a question of how labor can be arranged so that it can serve as a condition for the possibility of decreation for the individual, and a just community that extends beyond the individual. Labor is unavoidably trying: the toll it takes on mind and body is in fact precisely what makes it so significant for Weil, since it offers human beings a contact point with necessity. At its noblest, work makes of this contact an occasion for decreation through the self-forgetfulness engendered by non-acting action. Yet even at its worst, when labor conditions are more likely to bring about affliction and destruction for the worker, Weil still holds to the possibility of a redemptive decreation: “The only way to preserve one’s dignity under inevitable physical and moral sufferings is to accept them, to the precise extent that they are inevitable. But acceptance and submission are two very different things.”

The difference between merely submitting to such sufferings on the one hand, and actively consenting to them on the other, is for Weil a matter of attention, that is, of the unity in action of desire and the intellect. True attention lies at the back of all decreation, and it is unutterably more difficult to be attentive in this way under the conditions of degrading physical labor than in the context of intellectual labor or just and measured physical labor. Nevertheless, insofar as the laborer is able to consent to the affliction that constitutes her labor experience, she will be able to accept

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520 Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 86.
these sufferings as decreative rather than submit to them passively and be destroyed. In such cases where work conditions create affliction rather than opportunities for non-acting action, however, work’s ascetic character is heightened and attention and consent become in these circumstances akin to a practice for dying. Weil’s claim that it is just possible to offer consent to such affliction is not, then, made naively with no real sense of what that consent might cost.

III. Enrooted Radicalism: Weil’s Anarchism and Its Sources

Decreative labor—and decreated laborers—are at the heart of Weil’s political vision. Her “positive conception of politics was to try and restore human dignity and self-worth through a new focus on the spirituality of work as a way of overcoming the bondage of nature” and the allure of power, particularly as it flows within contemporary bureaucracies. Weil recognizes, however, that the momentum of a bureaucratic and technocratic society, with its continuous amalgamation of power, is difficult to slow down, much less dismantle or transform in such a way that an authentically just and decreative form of labor can become the center of the social and political spheres. She is aware that “we are not, at present, either intellectually or spiritually capable of such a transformation. We should be doing well if we were able to set about preparing for it.” These preparations must be focused upon labor and its role as the nucleus of a just political life. According to Weil, this notion that work should form the spiritual center of a just political sphere is one that she develops out of the

522 Bell, *The Way of Justice as Compassion*, 53.
thought of Proudhon and Tolstoy, among others. Citing the example of Goethe’s Faust, who “attains at the moment of death a glimpse of the most basic happiness in the form of a life lived out freely among free people, entirely taken up with a burdensome and dangerous physical labor, but accomplished in a spirit of brotherly cooperation,” Weil observes that this vision can be found in many other writers, including Rousseau and especially and “incomparably” in Tolstoy. At the end of her “Theoretical Picture of a Free Society,” Weil directly quotes Proudhon’s praise of the genius of the simplest artisan, and like Proudhon, she seeks to structure this free society around individual skilled workers, decentralized labor, and small labor collectivities in which individuals might confront the difficulties engendered by material conditions and together enact thoughtful solutions to these difficulties. In theory, such a society would have as its foundation

a form of material existence wherein only efforts exclusively directed by a clear intelligence would take place, which would imply that each worker himself had to control, without referring to any external rule, not only the adaptation of his efforts to the piece of work to be produced, but also their coordination with the efforts of all the other members of the collectivity.

While it is true that Weil’s direct experience of factory work slightly deflates her optimism in Réflexions that “we can be proud to belong to a civilization that has transmitted the vision of a new ideal” along these lines, it is nevertheless the case that even early on she was under no illusion about the difficulty of constructing such a work-centered society. Moreover, even as late as The Need for Roots, Weil continues to

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524 She believes that the early Marx attempts “to work out a philosophy of labor in the spirit very closely akin, at bottom, to that of Proudhon.” Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 169.
525 Weil, Réflexions, 123.
527 Weil, Réflexions, 124.
528 What is more, Florence de Lussy calls Réflexions that “admirable essay which contains, in an initial form, all of the philosopher’s thought, that is, all the intuitions which establish her thought and that one
espouse just such an ideal, while acknowledging that it probably can function only as a
limit-concept against which society can measure itself, rather than as a utopian position
that should be instantiated at any cost or by any means—including by means of
revolution.

Weil’s trenchant condemnation of the bureaucratization and technocritization of
contemporary life can be said to owe a debt to Proudhon, who disapproves of societal or
state ownership of land and the forces of production, since his unoptimistic view of the
human drive to dominate others and pursue self-interested ends means for him that small
collectivities and individual ownership of the means of production are required to serve
as a protection against the constant threat of an amalgamation of power and wealth.529 In
similar fashion, Weil holds that the human drive toward ever-expansive power can be
checked—if at all—only by means of political decentralization, the simplification of the
relationship between one’s labor and the money one needs in order to live, education
reforms that allow for apprenticeship and the linkage of manual and intellectual labor,
and radical changes in the way that property is distributed and utilized. However, one-
hundred years after Proudhon, Weil is even more pessimistic than he about the genuine
feasibility of instantiating such principles:

The only possibility of salvation would lie in a methodical co-operation between
all, strong and weak, with a view to accomplishing a progressive decentralization
of social life; but the absurdity of such an idea strikes one immediately. Such a
form of co-operation is impossible to imagine, even in dreams, in a civilization
that is based on competition, on struggle, on war. Apart from some such co-

529 Proudhon, reflecting in a demythologizing fashion on the doctrine of original sin, writes, “Thus the
dogma of the fall is not simply the expression of a special and transitory state of human reason and
morality: it is the spontaneous confession, in symbolic phrase, of this fact as astonishing as it is
indestructible, the culpability, the inclination to evil, of our race.” Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Philosophy
operation, there is no means of stopping the blind trend of the social machine towards an increasing centralization, until the machine itself suddenly jams and flies into pieces. What weight can the hopes and desires of those who are not at the control levers carry, when reduced to the most tragic impotence, they find themselves the mere playthings of blind and brutish forces?  

Despite the ominous tone Weil strikes in this passage, with its metaphor of society as a machine ready to explode, she in fact holds that cataclysmic change—especially that brought about by revolution or heralded in apocalyptic religious terms—can be neither expected nor desired, and that, whatever new form of the state or government it introduces will not be any more just than the one it replaced. Like Proudhon, who looks upon revolutionary violence with distaste and who hopes for a gradual and peaceful move from capitalism to the anarchist and mutualist structures he champions by means of economic reforms and the sharing and integration of manual and intellectual labor, Weil’s vision of a just political sphere is one in which changes in labor and economics form the center around which the political structures—participatory rather than party democracy, small productive co-operatives, and laws grounded in obligations rather than rights—cohere.

Work becomes for Weil—especially after her factory experience—a category that is simultaneously spiritual or moral and political in character. In this regard once more it is possible to see the similarity between her thought and that of Proudhon, but also Tolstoy, since for Tolstoy and Weil alike, it is imperative to rescue labor from the role it has come to play in contemporary technocracies for which industrialization, imperialism, and militaristic productivity have become unavoidably intertwined. While the occupation and Vichy regime in France played a part in Weil’s shift away from the more strictly  

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530 Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 120.
pacific position she espouses early on in life,\textsuperscript{531} she nevertheless remains firmly opposed to the cynical usage of patriotic and nationalist rhetoric in order to maintain society in a constant state of war preparedness for the sake of profit. Weil writes that the pivot around which revolves social life...is none other than the preparation for war. Seeing that the struggle for power is carried out by conquest and destruction, in other words by a diffused economic war, it is not surprising that actual war should come to occupy the foreground... Wars will bring in their train a frantic consumption of raw materials and capital equipment... When chaos and destruction have reached the limit beyond which the very functioning of the economic and social organization becomes materially impossible, our civilization will perish; and humanity, having gone back to a more or less primitive level of existence and to a social life dispersed into much smaller collectivities, will set out again along a new road which it is quite impossible for us to predict.\textsuperscript{532}

For Tolstoy as well, the redemptive capacities inherent in work have been corrupted by the political and economic dependence on war that is the defining characteristic of the developed world. With a pessimism not far from Weil’s, he observes:

That is where Christian humanity stands in our time. It is quite evident that if we continue to live as we are doing—guided in our private lives and the lives of our separate states solely by desire for personal welfare for ourselves and our states, and think, as we now do, to ensure this welfare by violence—then the means for violence of man against man and state against state will inevitably increase, and we shall first ruin ourselves more and more by expending a major portion of our productivity on armaments, and then become more and more degenerate and depraved... The precipice we are approaching is already visible, and even the most simple, naïve, and uneducated people cannot fail to see that by arming ourselves increasingly against one another and slaughtering one another in war, we must inevitably come to mutual destruction, like spiders in a jar.\textsuperscript{533}

Weil’s later position on war, which by the time of \textit{The Need for Roots} recognizes the possibility that war—or something like it—might provide the opportunity to exercise a self-sacrificial virtue, can be compared in a limited fashion to Proudhon’s analysis of

\textsuperscript{531} It should be noted, however, that Weil “was never a pacifist in the narrow sense of the word, as shown by her unbounded admiration for T. E. Lawrence, who was her model of a soldier saint.” McLellan, \textit{Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist}, 139.
\textsuperscript{532} Weil, \textit{Oppression and Liberty}, 116-7.
war. While Weil never approaches the extreme language used by Proudhon in La Guerre et la Paix to extol the state-constituting usefulness of war, she would agree with his claim that the economic element in war has become increasingly significant in recent history, on which account war has ceded any function it may have had in the past of permitting the exercise of virtue or channeling inherent human antagonisms into legitimate and direct confrontations. Proudhon, like both Tolstoy and Weil, sees just and equitable labor conditions—and a concomitant economic equilibrium—as the form in which such antagonisms must now be channeled, since the “improvements” in military technology and the growing importance of profit motives in the contemporary production of military products have debased war and divested it of any of its former glories.

Weil and Tolstoy are both more circumspect about the glories of war. Tolstoy, of course,

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534 Such a comparison is not wholly justified, however, since Weil understands the self-sacrifice made available in war and motivated by loyalty to the state is in fact a poor substitute for the kind of genuine self-sacrifice that should be offered up for the sake of the nation—a place that provides the citizen with roots in the past and hope for the future, and serves as a metaxu, permitting a connection with the good which lies beyond the finite and contingent goods that even the best and most just of nations can offer. Weil writes of the situation after France’s capitulation to the Nazis: “For men feel that there is something hideous about a human existence devoid of loyalty… Men feel also that they are born for sacrifice; and the only form of sacrifice remaining in the public imagination was military sacrifice, that is, a sacrifice offered to the State. Indeed, all that was left was the State. The ideal of the Nation, in the sense in which the men of 1789 or 1792 understood the word, which then used to bring tears of joy to people’s eyes—all that belonged irremediably to the past” (Weil, The Need for Roots, 127-8).

535 Indeed, Proudhon sees a juridical or political function for war in earlier eras of human history; he holds that it is via war that states were born, and that war was an inevitable means of balancing the aggression and conflict that are intrinsic parts of human nature, and that arise in every circumstance where hierarchies are in effect. Weil, too, argues that “the struggle of those who obey against those who command” (Oppression and Liberty, 128) is present everywhere in human history on account of the expansionist dynamic of power and the fact that humans seek to use others for their own ends. Yet for Weil, “the encounter of these two opposing forces does not constitute a war” (Oppression and Liberty, 129), and war is never an unavoidable or necessary outcome of that struggle. However, even Proudhon considers that, by the nineteenth century, war has run its course and fulfilled whatever useful function it might fulfill on the political level.

536 See Aaron Nolan, “Proudhon’s Sociology of War,” American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Vol. 29, no. 3 (Jul. 1970), 289-304. Nolan argues that, for Proudhon, “[w]ith the passing of centuries, the economic element in war…comes increasingly to dominate the juridical or political element; and as war becomes more materialistic in character its spiritual dimension contracts… Because of the economic element, war is ‘fatalement infectée,’ and with the increase in military hardware and the rise of the modern mass army, ‘all the moral sentiments amongst the combatants’ have been ‘paralyzed.’” (Nolan, “Proudhon’s Sociology of War,” 302, quoting from Proudhon’s La Guerre et la Paix.
categorically rejects the notion that such glories exist in any form, while Weil argues that they emerge out of war only very rarely. Nevertheless, all three agree in their insistence that work, and not war, offers humankind the firmest basis for bringing justice into existence, both among individuals and within communities and polities. Weil draws from Proudhon the notion that “work is the highest manifestation of life, intelligence, and liberty,” and considers the greatest contribution of the French anarchist tradition to be the idea that “work is the concrete manifestation in the sphere of practical activity of the ‘moral’ dimension of human nature… the source of morality and of positive moral law, as well as the affirmation of man’s dignity.” For Weil, as for Proudhon and Tolstoy, work has become embedded in the capitalist war machine, and is in danger of losing its ability to serve as the lynchpin of a just and equitable society. Weil is more pessimistic than either Proudhon or Tolstoy about the possibility that a change will take place that will allow work to become what it must become in order to transform social and political life, perhaps in part because of the later period in which she was living and writing. Weil at times seems nearly without hope that change might ever occur, since “[t]he powerful means [of change] are oppressive, the non-powerful means remain inoperative.”

However, her time in the factory ultimately leads Weil, not to give up on the notion that just conditions for laborers lie at the heart of a just political sphere, but rather, to recast this notion in language that links the political and economic elements of justice more nearly to moral and spiritual categories. In so doing, she seeks to give “full recognition to the moral issues involved—to how people are hurt, the depths to which

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538 Nolan, “Proudhon’s Sociology of War,” 300.
539 Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 120.
they are made to suffer within work.”\textsuperscript{540} Because work is ultimately “the action by which man recreates his own life,”\textsuperscript{541} it is of the utmost importance that the workplace and its institutions be reconstructed and reformed in order to turn them into what they ought to be: places of spiritual and political rootedness. For Weil, work must become the locus of both a decreated personal [non]-identity and of political engagement; for this to happen, it must cease to be a mere means of economic gain or subsistence for the workers, and a source of seemingly limitless profitability for those who own and control the means of production. What is called for instead, claims Weil, is “to work out a philosophy of labor in the spirit very closely akin, at bottom, to that of Proudhon,”\textsuperscript{542} such that labor is allowed to serve as both the means by which the individual is decreated through attentive contact with necessity, and the substratum of a renewed and rooted political life for communities and nations. Only when citizens are able to feel rooted in their labors will they be capable of participating directly in the political arena in just ways. As Weil explains, “As long as working men are homeless in their own places of work, they will never truly feel at home in their country, never be responsible members of society.”\textsuperscript{543}

The ability to be a responsible member of society is related directly to the ability of an individual to think and act independently, and to preserve—particularly in connection with her work—a measure of autonomy apart from the collectivity to which she belongs, no matter how benevolent the collectivity, and no matter how thoroughly it offers a place of rootedness to the worker. The more an individual must appeal to or depend upon others in order to live from day to day, the greater the likelihood will be that

\textsuperscript{540} Blum and Seidler, \textit{A Truer Liberty}, 187.
\textsuperscript{541} Weil, \textit{First and Last Notebooks}, 18.
\textsuperscript{542} Weil, \textit{Oppression and Liberty}, 169.
\textsuperscript{543} Weil, \textit{The Simone Weil Reader}, 64.
she lacks the independence of thought and action which safeguards her sense of responsibility to others and to her community. As Weil frequently observes, subservience breeds only despair and apathy, not responsibility or freedom of thought. In sketching a picture of the kind of society which allows for free and responsible individuals who are capable of recognizing their obligations to others and to their polity properly configured, Weil draws near to Proudhon. For Weil as for Proudhon, political changes have their genesis in economic changes that center upon labor: a worker whose personal garden is large enough (and who possesses sufficient leisure outside the working day to tend it) has more independence than a worker who must purchase all her food from a grocer, and an artisan who owns her own tools and has the freedom to execute work orders directly is freer than an unskilled laborer whose hands are simply extensions of a factory machine which operates or not at the behest of the manager or factory owner.544

Thus, according to Weil, “the least evil society is that in which the general run of men are most often obliged to think while acting, have the most opportunities for exercising control over collective life as a whole, and enjoy the greatest amount of independence.”545 Weil, like Proudhon, envisions a society in which a reconstituted working class serves as the basic foundation upon which a more just social and political arrangement should be fashioned. In such a society, large-scale production would be abolished in favor of small workshops grouped together with a central assembly shop for which each artisan would have some responsibility. Artisans would own their own tools, along with a home and some land, and would have easy and free access to education in both technical fields and the liberal arts, the latter of which would be taught in an idiom

545 Ibid.
applicable to their lives and the trades they pursue. Tools, home, and land would return to the state to be redistributed upon the worker’s death in order to minimize the inherited accumulation of wealth and goods and make the skill and responsible participation of the individual of paramount importance. Like Proudhon, Weil calls for the suppression of joint-stock corporations and the general dispersion of industrial activity in order to simplify and make as transparent as possible the relationship between work performed and money exchanged.\(^{546}\) Weil’s proposed reforms for the agricultural classes share with both Tolstoy’s and Proudhon’s proposals the recognition that land should “be regarded as raw material for carrying on work, and not as an asset in the distribution of an inheritance.”\(^{547}\) As with industrial and post-industrial urban workers, agricultural laborers should have access to education, although it should be presented in a different idiom—one which speaks to their experience of engagement with nature and their closer relationship to folklore and poetry. They should be able to serve for a time in other areas of the country, in order to assuage the desire to see something outside of their own villages, and to develop a feeling of solidarity and a broader knowledge base vis-à-vis other agricultural regions.\(^{548}\) In both the case of artisans and peasants, Weil sees education as the principal part of the renewal of labor and the revitalization of the political milieu; this emphasis is something she shares with Tolstoy even more than with Proudhon.

\(^{546}\) For Weil’s more detailed description of these reforms and the concomitant economic reforms, see *The Need for Roots*, 71-78.

\(^{547}\) Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 83.

\(^{548}\) For Weil’s proposals on the reforms required in the countryside, see *The Need for Roots*, 78-95.
Also like Proudhon, Weil calls for these measures to be instituted via reform rather than violent revolution, yet for Weil, this is on account of her belief that power itself, rather than any particular economic or political structure, is the most primordial determining feature of society, and power—experienced by human beings as submission to necessity—never can be eradicated. Indeed, unlike Proudhon, for whom genuine freedom necessarily entails a liberation “from all internal and external coercion,” Weil insists that a transformation of economic structures, while crucial if justice is to be instantiated in the social and political spheres, cannot in the end remove from human existence the experience of being subject to necessity in some form or other. While Weil retains a classically liberal Kantian aversion to heteronomy—she insists, after all, that “[t]o the extent to which a man’s fate is dependent on other men, his own life escapes not only out of his hands, but also out of the control of his intelligence”—she nevertheless maintains that “Everything that is real is subject to necessity.” It is chiefly for this reason, then, that she insists upon reformism rather than revolution; if by revolution one intends the eradication of all constraint (natural and socio-political) or the reversal of the prevailing forms of constraint, then revolution is simply a dangerous chimera. Liberty—

549 This does not mean, however, that Weil is blind to the problems created by reform’s necessary compromises with the status quo: “As for reformism, the principle of the lesser evil on which it is based is certainly eminently reasonable, however discredited it may be through the fault of those who have hitherto made use of it; though remember, if it has so far served only as a pretext for capitulation, this is due not to the cowardice of a few leaders, but to an ignorance unfortunately common to all; for as long as the worst and the best have not been defined in terms of a clearly and concretely conceived ideal, and then the precise margin of possibilities determined, we do not know which is the lesser evil…” (Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 61). This points to the way that Weil herself envisions much of her political work in both its early and late phases, namely, as the sketching out of both worst and best, and the construction of an ideal against which the present political landscape may be measured.

550 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise*, vol. III (Paris: Rivière, 1930), 409. This means, for Proudhon, not only a freedom from arbitrary government and legal, social, and political constraint, but even freedom from slavery to the passions. See Alan Ritter’s discussion of this point in “Proudhon and the Problem of Community,” *Review of Politics* 29:4 (Oct 1967), 468-9.


552 Ibid., 178.
both from one’s passions and from the coercive force of an unjust polity or workplace—must begin, not with the grandiose overthrow of the entire “system,” but rather, with a re-making of the conditions under which labor may be pursued and a clear-eyed acknowledgement of the dynamics of power. While this position drew much criticism from the traditional left—Trotsky claimed that Weil merely espoused a “hoary formula of liberalism, vivified with cheap anarchistic exaltation”\(^{553}\)—Weil never retreated from her stark avowal that “revolution is a word for which you kill, for which you die, for which you send the labouring masses to their death, but which does not possess any content.”\(^{554}\) Thus, for Weil, a renewed vision of technology and labor, together with a realistic assessment of the extent to which individuals in society can develop autonomy of thought and independence of action are required if one is even to conceive of a renewed political life, much less attempt to bring it into existence.

While it is the case that Weil sees work as a good in itself and not something to be directed toward some other end, nevertheless there is an important outcome to be had from any labor in which the attentive unity of thought and action are made possible: the creation of free communities in which each and every worker participates equally. Weil writes of a political milieu constituted by such free communities: “Social relations would be directly modeled upon the organization of labor; men would group themselves in small working collectivities, where co-operation would be the sovereign law, and where each would be able to understand clearly and to verify the connection between the rules to which his life was subject and the public interest.”\(^{555}\) Following Proudhon in this form of organization, Weil places such co-operative groups at the center of her vision of a

\(^{553}\) As quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, 62.
\(^{554}\) Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 55.
\(^{555}\) Ibid., 106.
revitalized political life. For Weil more than for Proudhon, however, the emphasis on these small co-operatives serves not only to maximize economic transparency and simplify the relationship between production and remuneration, but also to maximize the operation of the intellect in and through work as well as the political participation of those individuals who make up the co-operative group. According to Weil, there must be a clear and easily comprehensible link between the attention present in labor on an individual level and the attention brought to bear upon suffering and injustice at the public, political level; that is, the movement from the attentive and decreative labor of the individual to justice and rootedness within a polity ought to be readily apparent to every individual in the polity. Such clarity about the link between labor and justice is more likely to be accessible, she thinks, within smaller co-operative groups, since it is “only possible to establish cohesion between a limited number of men. Beyond that, there is no longer anything but a juxtaposing of individuals.”

By the time of *The Need for Roots*, Weil articulates this link between the individual’s work and the presence of justice in the broader arena of political life in terms of *metaxu*: work becomes the concrete (or one might even say sacramental) means by which we are able to move from justice’s root in a reality outside the world to a justice made present among human beings in the political arena. Because authentic justice depends on an equality between human beings which is almost always rooted in the mystical-ascetic anthropology of decreation, Weil argues that

What is required is that this world and the world beyond, in their double beauty, should be present and associated in the act of work… Such an association can be achieved by a mode of presenting thoughts which relates them directly to the movements and operations peculiar to each sort of work, by a process of assimilation sufficiently complete to enable them to penetrate into the very

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556 Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 143.
substance of the individual being, and by a habit impressed upon the mind and connecting these thoughts with the work movements. Work of this sort—that is, work performed with thought-infused attention and in such a way that the should-not-be of self-assertion is decreatively brought into [non]-being—is capable of serving as the basis, not only of the dignity of the individual, but also of a polity with the “very strongest possible roots in the wide universe.” The formation of a just society, in which needs are met, obligations are fulfilled, and laws are created and applied with reason depends for Weil upon the development of labor conditions that allow for the decreated individual to become the citizen par excellence. However, these conditions, which share much with a Proudhonian form of anarchism, push beyond Proudhon on the issues of individual morality, the role of law, and the function of utopia as a category. This “push beyond” draws its force from Weil’s idiosyncratic and original vision of a mystical-political schema in which reason trumps the apocalyptic imaginary one usually finds in utopian thinking, and yet in which mysticism’s interruptive quality retains its significance on account of her decreative anthropology.

IV. The Great Beast and the General Will: Weil’s Conception of Collectivity

What is unique about Weil’s concept of a work-based civilization is that it combines a classically liberal appreciation for reason, which she considers crucial for both attentive labor and for a justice that renders prestige and inequality insignificant in the political arena, with a mysticism that grows out of an acknowledgement of the limitations of reason and the ultimately “supernatural” roots of human freedom. More succinctly, Weil writes: “Rationalism: if it means thinking that reason is the only...

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557 Weil, The Need for Roots, 95.
558 Ibid., 98.
instrument, that is true; if it means thinking that reason can be an all-sufficient instrument, that is ridiculous.”

In other words, in our everyday interactions with others in the social and political context, and in our orientation toward the work that we do, we must rely only upon reason, and we must do all we can to create environments in which reason may operate in and through our actions. To seek a solution to the problems of injustice beyond the limits of reason—whether that solution is one of traditional authority or of the consolation of an eschatological redemption—is to vitiate the freedom we possess through reason, whose exercise permits the possibility of attention and non-acting action in both our work and the way we relate to others in society. And yet the outcome of such an application of reason ought by rights to be the decreation of the falsely autonomous self—a decreation which is constituted by a surrender of the defensible boundaries of selfhood without, however, a descent into irrationality or pre-rationality.

For Weil, explains Miklos Vetö,

> Labor is always the correct solution of a certain problem posed to humanity, and as such it requires non-perspective in the use of our intellectual faculties. It must not only be a solution that is correct, but the best solution, and there is only one best solution to a given problem. In this way labor is analogous to just action in general, and there is a passage from the theoretical realization of objective laws to a...conformity with necessity... Being an expression of necessity, this action is beautiful, and as in a correct addition, the personality must not have any part in it.

Put another way, reason conjugated via desire in an attentive, concrete form of labor will lead to a conformity with necessity which is inevitably identical among all human beings who are engaged in that particular form of labor. “This identity serves as an intersubjective link, creating community. Behind the intersubjectivity, work, transformed

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into acceptance, merely indicates a real ground in which all reason can take root.\textsuperscript{561} The self-forgetfulness which permits a worker to arrive at the solution to a problem or to conceive a vision of a completed product while in the midst of its production is the same self-forgetfulness that permits several workers to come together to discuss the proper arrangement of various tasks or to render justice in situations of injustice. Neither labor nor justice—if either is to be considered authentic—allows room for the expansive, egoist self. It is precisely this notion that the personality has no role to play in either labor or justice that represents Weil’s most important contribution to political thought; it is also one of the most criticized elements of Weil’s political thought, in part because it appears to weaken the status of the individual agent, thereby damaging the foundation of a democratic polity which rests upon reasoning individuals acting to shape and influence collective, public spaces and institutions. What is peculiar about Weil’s elaboration of the just political sphere founded on labor is that it is comprised of the free, independent, thinking, responsible citizen and the ascetic, decreated, impersonal, obedient (non)-being; most peculiar of all, however, is that they are one and the same entity.

The idea that political life can—indeed, must—be grounded in a self-abnegating ethical life that springs from labor in which thought and action can be joined in attention is not as thoroughly apolitical as it may seem at first glance. It is the case that in Weil’s schema the ethical outcome of an individual responding to conditions of work (or to the experience of affliction or beauty) in a manner that leads to decreation is the principal and fundamental element of political life. And it is also the case that Weil’s hostility to much of what traditionally constitutes the political sphere—things such as political

\textsuperscript{561}Moulakis, \textit{Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial}, 141. Moulakis goes on to explain, “This ground is kept from being reified by the fact that it is settled beyond existence.”
parties and other collective institutions and groups—is well-documented and need not be rehearsed at great length here. It is sufficient to remark that she reserves some of her deepest scorn for what she often calls “the Great Beast” (a phrase she borrows from Plato), and considers the “collective [to be] the object of all idolatry.”

In a radical move, she calls for the abolition of all political parties, since “A political party is a machine for crafting collective passions. A political party is an organization designed to exert collective pressure on the thought of each and every human being who belongs to it. The first—and in the final analysis, the only—purpose of every political party is its own growth, and a growth without limits at that.”

She also condemns harshly the manipulation of language which she thinks diminishes the capacity of individuals to think and act freely apart from collective opinion and the cultural imaginary. She is deeply suspicious of intersubjective communication, arguing that a genuine political consensus is rare when power differentials exercise subtle control over supposedly democratic processes. She savages the notion that something like communal reason or collective thought might exist: “The number 2 thought of by one man cannot be added to the number 2 thought of by another man so as to make up the number 4; similarly, the idea that one of the co-operators has of the partial work he is carrying out cannot be combined with the idea that each of the others has of his respective task so as to form a coherent piece of work. Several human minds cannot become united in one collective mind.”

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562 Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, 192. See *Republic* VI.493a-d
564 See Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 118-119, where she writes, “Nothing is easier…than to spread any myth whatsoever throughout a whole population… It is often said that force is powerless to overcome thought; but for this to be true, there must be thought. Where irrational opinions hold the place of ideas, force is all-powerful… With the popular press and the wireless, you can make a whole people swallow with their breakfast or their supper a series of ready-made and…absurd opinions… but you cannot with the aid of these things arouse so much as a gleam of thought.”
565 Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 82.
Moreover, her decided emphasis on the role of the reasoning individual and the ethical imperative of decreation, together with the notion that the political sphere is something that must be structured according to obligations carried out in an impersonal fashion rather than by rights applied to autonomous agents in the context of intersubjective public space, make her political thought appear either inconsistent, anti-democratic, or apolitical to many critics. Questions arise: how is she able to square a decidedly Enlightenment stress on the freedom of the individual to think and act without external coercion with a seemingly reactionary call for “needs of the soul” such as obedience, hierarchy, and even, in certain limited cases, a form of censorship? Does her idiom of obligation, impersonality, and love for the other belong in a democratic political arena, or does it confuse the private and the public, thereby “presum[ing] the applicability of personal virtues…to the political realm” and “eras[ing] those virtues specific to politics that are in need of remembrance and defense”\(^{566}\)? Can her constructive political proposal with its anarchic elements such as small cooperatives and limits on private property actually be classified as a political proposal, or is it rather a call for the deconstruction of political life as we know it, with its necessarily public institutions, collective identities, and broad government structures? While these criticisms are not without merit, it is important to try and read Weil on her own terms, without first attempting to assimilate her proposals to this or that political category. As political scientist Edward Andrew observes, “Weil is nothing if not an extremely singular and original thinker; she is not a professor of any received doctrine. And this fact places great demands on the reader.”\(^{567}\) In order to answer these questions and meet these criticisms, it will be necessary first to examine


Weil’s suspicion of collectives, followed by an analysis of the role that decreative love plays in her mystical-political schema and her discussion of rights versus obligations, and finally finish with an assessment of her position that love has political purchase, and is not merely a private or otherworldly matter.

According to Weil, the created order is governed by necessity, which for her means not only the material world with its ordered and inter-related structures described by scientific law, but also the world of social matter with its own relational networks: what Patrick Patterson and Lawrence Schmidt call “the determinative dynamic of human corporate social life… In this realm, the realm of the great beast, necessity expresses itself as the collective mind and will of society driven by the quest for prestige in the face of public opinion, and mistaking the order of necessity for the order of the good.”

Weil, in keeping with her criticism that Marx possesses the concept of social matter but does not sufficiently develop it, argues that the necessity that characterizes social matter can—and should—be studied just as readily as the necessity that characterizes the order of the universe. She writes,

The idea of working out a mechanics of social relationships had been adumbrated by many lucid minds… As in ordinary mechanics, the fundamental notion would be that of force. The great difficulty is to grasp this notion. Such an idea contains nothing incompatible with the purest spirituality; it is complementary to it. Plato compared society to a huge beast which men are forced to serve and which they are weak enough to worship. Christianity, so close to Plato on many points, contains not only the same thought, but the same image; the beast in the Apocalypse is sister to the great beast in Plato. Working out a social mechanics means, instead of worshipping the beast, to study its anatomy, physiology, reflexes, and above all, to try to understand the mechanism of its conditioned reflexes, that is to say find a method for training it.

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569 Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 165.
It is certainly the case that Weil employs some of her strongest language in condemning the concept of the collective, whether it assumes the form of a political collective, a post-industrial bureaucracy, or the broader society—the great beast—\textit{in toto}. She does not speak delicately when she claims that the “social order is irreducibly that of the prince of this world,” or that “The Great Beast is always repulsive.”\footnote{Weil, \textit{The Simone Weil Reader}, 392-3.} For Weil, one of the principal dangers of the collective is that it makes a consensus among several people or groups of people \textit{feel} like a movement in the direction of justice, whether or not that is truly the case. This feeling “brings with it a sense of duty. Divergence, where this agreement is concerned, appears as a sin… The state of conformity is an imitation of grace.”\footnote{Ibid., 394.}

Nevertheless, it is clear that her deep suspicion of the collective does not preclude the development in her thought of certain constructive proposals for a common political life among citizens of a nation. Even more significantly, in fact, this suspicion serves as a useful rebuke to a certain naïveté arguably present within classical liberal political theory, in which the subtleties of power dynamics, internalized oppressions, and false consciousness are too often overlooked, unrecognized, or dismissed as insignificant. Well before Foucault develops his analysis of power or Laura Mulvey her concept of the internalized male gaze, Weil calls attention to the fact that power lies at the heart of human existence, and that it accompanies in some form or another every element of the political sphere, even when its presence is implicit, unacknowledged, or operating in subtle and underdetermined ways. One’s experience of oppression, Weil notes, is far more likely to be internalized and contribute to servility and unthinking compliance with
the unjust status quo than to inspire revolt or resistance. This is particularly so when oppression is an ongoing state of affairs, or when it figures as part of the physical, social, and psychological condition constituting affliction. In such cases, the process of internalization is often quite thoroughgoing, and can be nearly impossible to contest with any success. Weil observes,

Affliction hardens and discourages because, like a red-hot iron, it stamps the soul to its very depths with the contempt, the disgust, and even the self-hatred and sense of guilt and defilement which crime logically should produce but actually does not… Everybody despises the afflicted to some extent, although practically no one is conscious of it. This law of sensibility also holds good with regard to ourselves. In the case of someone in affliction, all the contempt, revulsion, and hatred are turned inwards; they penetrate to the centre of his soul and from there they colour the whole universe with their poisoned light.  

Although there can be no question that the individual worker uniting thought to action while engaging in attentive labor is the foundation stone upon which Weil constructs her proposal for a just polity, Weil never considers this individual apart from the social context in which she is always already embedded. This social context necessarily includes—and is even dominated by—the location of the individual within the nexus of material and social force that make up the realm of necessity. This is as true at the epistemological level—witness Weil’s idiosyncratic reading of Descartes, in which “the body classifies things in the world before there is any thought”—as it is at the political level. No individual can participate in a political space that is wholly free from the constraints and determinations of power and prestige, however subtle or direct they might be. Weil’s “very idea of philosophy will not let us divide an individual from her society so easily, and it will not let us lose sight of a common good she believed to be at the heart of all human beings which must be reflected in their moral and political life…

573 Weil, Lectures on Philosophy, 31.
for Simone Weil is not a product of some purely rational choice even if a person could remove herself from complicating life circumstances... Every human being must struggle from those circumstances to justice.”^574 There can be no Rawlsian “veil of ignorance” in Weil’s schema which permits the rational actor a kind of temporary exit from the hurdy-gurdy of embodied and particular political claims, since her analysis of the operation and effects of power leads her to conclude that one cannot escape it, cannot gain a detached or objective perspective outside of it, cannot isolate oneself from its omnipresence. It is not this ineluctable embeddedness in itself that makes the collective so dangerous for Weil, however; to be caught up in the web of necessity and to serve as a relation of power within that web is a fact of existence, and one may respond to that fact in a number of ways. The danger lies in the seductive lure of conformity, the wider and easier path of uncritical participation in the collective ethos, and the unquestioning surrender of independent thought and action in the face of what appears to be a harmonious consensus in the political arena, but is often a disguise for the unbridled abuse of power. Indeed, like Foucault, who describes power as something that is non-localizable and exercised through networks in which individuals serve as its conduits,^575 Weil argues that, when it comes to the social sphere and its insidious operations, “[w]e are unaware...of being in falsehood, of being passive, and of course, of being

^574 Bell, *The Way of Justice as Compassion*, 36.
^575 See, for example, Foucault’s statement: “Power must ... be analyzed as something that circulates, or rather as something that functions only when it is part of a chain. It is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated. Power functions. Power is exercised through networks. And individuals do not simply circulate in these networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power... They are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals” (Michel Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended,*” trans David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 29. For a more extensive analysis of the similarities between Weil and Foucault on the themes of power or necessity, see Krista E. Duttenhaver and Coy D. Jones, “Power, Subjectivity, and Resistance in the Thought of Simone Weil and Michel Foucault,” *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 176-92. See also McLeLLan, who offhandedly observes that Weil’s “searching exposures of the psychological and material bases of power are akin to those of Foucault.” (McLeLLan, *Simone Weil Utopian Pessimist*, 269).
Weil refuses to construct her concept of the individual on a naïvely appropriated framework of the autonomous agent whose defining characteristic is a disembodied reason free from the workings of power.

It is the case, however—as has been so often noted—that the individual takes center stage in Weil’s re-envisioned political milieu, and given Weil’s diagnosis of the problems that arise at the level of the collective, this emphasis on the individual is not, perhaps, surprising. Arguably, Weil’s position on the importance of the individual ethical agent as a counter-weight to the collective develops in part under the influence of her teacher Alain’s peculiar form of Kantianism. This genealogy would seem to locate her firmly—if not entirely squarely—in alignment with the classical Enlightenment political tradition, at the center (or perhaps apex) of which is found the rational political agent acting and speaking intersubjectively in the public domain. And yet this is clearly not the picture of the ideal political milieu Weil sketches, despite her focus on the individual and his capacity to engage in a form of work in which thought and action are free from heteronomous coercion and unified through attention. What are we to make of this? In order to grasp Weil’s position, it is necessary to see a doubled tension in her political thought when it comes to individuals and collectivities. There is a tension between her conception of the collective as both a source of depravity and political corruption and a source of rootedness and political equilibrium, and an analogous tension between her conception of the individual as an autonomous being capable of free thought.

577 This is the thesis behind much of Moulakis’ book, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*. Moulakis argues that the centrality of work in Weil’s political thought also owes a debt to Alain: “Weil followed her mentor Alain into a particular variant of Kantianism, which attempts to overcome the discontinuity between pure and practical reason by the creative circumvention called work. Work, according to Weil, was to mediate between the experience of the world of everyday life and the mathematical conception of a world equated with natural law” (*Moulakis, Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, 234).
and action, as a creature defined by an enslavement to the passions and an inability to resist the pull of the imagination. This double tension should not be read as a set of inconsistencies or ultimately incompatible positions. Rather, they represent Weil’s refusal to subscribe to a single political ideology or to champion this or that political and economic blueprint without taking seriously the snares that such a position risks encountering. In positing this doubled perspective on both individuals and nations, Weil is describing matters of fact: individuals have the capacity to act without thought of gain, but most often they do not. Nations have the capacity to offer their citizens roots in the past and continuity with a hopeful future, but most often they do not. The point, as Andrea Nye expresses it, is that “specific governmental or economic structures are not the determinant feature of a just society. The common dream of political theorists and social architects, that a correct model or blueprint for the just society can be drawn, is an illusion.”

Thus, for Weil, the role of the individual in relation to the collective, and the political possibilities open to individuals qua individuals and to individuals as members of a political milieu, are not problems to be solved by espousing either the enlightened and rationalizing self-interest of liberal capitalism or the historically-mediated class struggle of socialism. Nor, she thinks, will the solutions proposed by Proudhon and the anarchist tradition alone rescue justice for society, although their notions of the importance of work and co-operative deliberation, and of reducing and localizing production go a long way toward addressing many of the consequences of the underlying and thoroughgoing injustices in society. Instead, Weil deploys a particular vision of the individual and of the collective—a vision that proposes a kind of embodied and rooted yet simultaneously impersonal and independent existence for both the just individual and

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578 Nye, *Philosophia*, 121.
the just collective—as fundamental to the construction of a legitimate and just political sphere, but at every moment she hedges this constructive vision about with the important caveat: the omnipresent operation of the relations of force precludes any facile assumption that individual selves are capable of participating in justice without the decreative process that allows for the redemption of these relations. The individual in Weil’s political thought can indeed in some sense be considered the heir of the Enlightenment tradition: her freedom from external compulsion and the irrationality of collective opinion is to be safeguarded, since “[o]nly the individual is capable of the \textit{politique d'entendement}. The collective reinforces only the madness of tyranny and with it despotism.”\textsuperscript{579} However, it is what constitutes this individual freedom for Weil—namely, the self’s bare capacity to consent to its own unmaking—and the way in which this can be realized in the individual—namely, by an obedience to necessity that suggests inert matter rather than the autonomous agent—that together set her conception of individuality apart from the classical autonomy of the Enlightenment self.

Despite Weil’s clear mistrust of the collective and her astute if somewhat pessimistic analysis of the operations of power, she nevertheless makes room in her political vision for the beneficial elements of institutional politics and the means by which individuals may think and act, not as a mass collective, but in concert for the benefit of the nation and of their neighbors and fellow citizens, as well as for the good of others outside their own collective. A collective may be a good, Weil says, when it serves as one of the \textit{metaxu} for its members. The \textit{metaxu} are for Weil “those relative and mixed blessings (home, country, traditions, culture, etc.) which warm and nourish the

\textsuperscript{579} Moulakis, \textit{Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial}, 160.
soul and without which, short of sainthood, a human life is not possible.”\textsuperscript{580} To deprive a person of her metaxu is a dehumanizing measure. While it is the case that humans are enjoined to love God, Weil insists that “[t]his can only mean the order of the world and one’s neighbour, because, until he has come down and shown himself, we do not see God.”\textsuperscript{581} Therefore, the infinite love humans ought to direct toward God must be directed toward the finite goods in the world that serve as mediations of that love, whether those take the form of our fellow human beings and their needs we must serve or the living human collectivity to which we belong. Weil does not mean by this to canonize a particular divinity or religious faith as being at the root of a healthy and humane collectivity; on the contrary, although her focus in \textit{The Need for Roots} is upon France and the particular criteria that must be met if it is to become a revitalized political entity after the second world war, she seeks to establish conditions and concrete suggestions which any nation can employ in order to become a vital political milieu for its people. Indeed, as Weil herself claims, a civilization founded on the spirituality of work is something that could be ratified by those on both the left and the right, and even those for whom religion is unpalatable: “It is a conception that can be propagated without running the risk of promoting the slightest discord. The word spirituality doesn’t imply any particular affiliation. Even the Communists, in the present state of things, would probably not reject it… The conservative parties wouldn’t dare to reject such a conception; nor would the radical, laical, or masonic circles, either. Christians would seize on it with joy… But one can only lay hold of such a conception in fear and trembling. How can we touch it


\textsuperscript{581} Weil, \textit{First and Last Notebooks}, 81.
without soiling it, turning it into a lie?" The key for Weil is to avoid treating the finite goods—such as nations—which are reflections of and links to the infinite good, as objects of desire in and for themselves. To err in this way is to make an idol of something like the nation, which blocks the possibility of decreation (for which one must cultivate a desire without an object, and act without attachment to the fruits of action).

“This,” she explains, “is the criterion. All those are worshippers of the true God who love conditioned things, without exception, only conditionally.” She makes clear that we owe respect to a collectivity, “not because of itself, but because it is food for mankind.” Weil gives several reasons why collectivities as metaxu are deserving of love and ought to be preserved, sometimes even at the cost of our lives. It is worth quoting her at length:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future… Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.

Weil sees this participation in a community as essential for the rootedness of human beings. It is in and through these communities—nations or what she sometimes calls cités to distinguish them from the state in its militaristic modern guise—that humans are able to engage in a political life that possesses the seeds of justice, and to interact reciprocally with other communities and political entities in a way that does violence to

582 Weil, The Need for Roots, 97.
583 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 139, emphasis Weil’s.
584 Weil, The Need for Roots, 7.
585 Ibid., 43.
the culture and roots of neither group. Acknowledging the importance of communities and political participation in the nation does not mean that Weil relinquishes her earlier view that the Great Beast is characterized principally by the unstable flow and manipulation of power, and that it is impossible categorically to safeguard a political unity from the dangers of collective life. Indeed, she continues to hold to her position that “[p]ublic opinion imposes itself in one form or another in every society without exception. There are two moralities, social morality and supernatural morality, and only those who are illumined by grace have access to the second.”

However, in *The Need for Roots* she seeks to develop the idea of the nation as one of the most important *metaxu* helping to bring together those who are subject to necessity in the social sphere with the supernatural morality that transcends it, and to establish guidelines for protecting the nation’s sacramental character as much as possible from the kinds of besetting evils to which polities and other collective institutions are prone.

In order to accomplish this task, Weil recognizes the need for a theory about the possible ways in which a love for and devotion to political life and to the nation might be achieved without sacrificing the capacity to be critical of political failures and of the oppression and injustice that are inevitable elements of the political sphere. Crucial for this task is her concept of the rooted nation as a utopian regulative ideal to which one

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586 She writes, “Reciprocal exchanges by which different sorts of environment exert influence on one another are no less vital than to be rooted in natural surroundings. But a given environment should not receive an outside influence as something additional to itself, but as a stimulant intensifying its own particular way of life. It should draw nourishment from outside contributions only after having digested them... When a really talented painter walks into a picture gallery, his own originality is thereby confirmed. The same thing should apply to the various communities throughout the world and the different social environments” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 43). In keeping with this notion is Weil’s intense and astute criticism of France’s colonialist policies—a criticism for which she was not lauded or loved, even by the French Left, and which represents one of the earliest attacks on colonialism by a French intellectual. According to Weil, with the kind of military conquest in which the conqueror “remains a stranger in the land of which he has taken possession, uprootedness becomes an almost mortal disease among the subdued population...as in the French possessions in the Pacific” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 44).

must always aspire, but which cannot be fully actualized in a world governed by necessity. As Moulakis observes, “In close analogy to the experience of God, Weil perceived the _patria absconsdita_. The fall of France allowed her, out of the emotion of the vacuum that remained, a _reevaluation_ of the political order. This order could no longer be understood in the category of the pure totalitarian state but must be seen as the _milieu vital par excellence_. And its revitalization must be fought for.”\(^{588}\) So long as one understands that the political sphere can never wholly be purified of the dangerous collective currents which always threaten it with injustice, oppression, and illusion, one avoids the kind of idolatrous nationalism and virulent xenophobia that so often attend the enshrinement of the state as one of the highest human values. Moulakis is right in linking Weil’s careful views on the identity of a nation with her profoundly anti-triumphalistic views on the identity of God. Just as her notion of an absent God is intended to render impotent the militaristic and triumphalistic language of so much of religious history, so also is her notion of an absent or unrealizable _patrie_ meant to strip patriotism of its jingoistic and idolatrous posture in order to make of it something purer and better—something which might more authentically offer its citizens something to love and a sense of continuity with the past and future. Her “atheism of purification” applies also, then, to the way in which one is to think of one’s nation. Weil’s call for a new patriotism is in fact an effort to restore vitality and reconstitute appropriate limits to the concept of the polity, both by exposing the dangers of group-think and the propagandistic and inflammatory rhetoric which characterize contemporary concepts of the nation, and by establishing a healthy and just political milieu as something fragile to love and to strive for, but never something to proclaim as perfect or as deserving of worship. To recognize

\(^{588}\) Moulakis, _Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial_, 235.
one’s polity, not as something complete and faultless and superior to other polities, but instead as something which one is always struggling to realize, is to have a kind of “compassion” for the fragility and imperfection of one’s community. It is to see the nation as one of the most precious metaxu—and moreover, one which can easily be destroyed or damaged—and to look with a clear-eyed perspective on the failures and injustices which are ineluctably part of the political realm and its history. Such a love for one’s nation “can keep its eyes open on injustices, cruelties, mistakes, falsehoods, crimes, and scandals contained in the country’s past, its present, and in its ambitions in general, quite openly and fearlessly, and without being thereby diminished; the love being only rendered thereby more painful.”\(^{589}\) One owes respect and love to one’s patrie because it serves as a custodian of customs, cultural traditions, and the things that keep humans rooted by allowing them access to a living continuity that extends beyond their own individual lives toward the past and the future, and by offering them a place in which they might experience a sense of belonging and develop tools for resisting the deracinating force of institutions and of the great beast. Weil often refers to a vision of a vital nation of this sort by the term “cité” in order to differentiate it from a polity which, analogously to the rapacious ego, seeks to install itself as an end and an idol for the people, rather than mediating justice for them and operating as one of the most significant metaxu. Weil is very clear in both her earlier and later political thought that the vision she crafts of a humane and just polity is not a utopian ideal that can ever be fully realized, but rather, is a regulative ideal for which human beings must strive and seek but never truly bring to completion. Only when we attend to the concept of the truly good, she

\(^{589}\) Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 173.
thinks, will we have some ability to measure our failures and inadequacies.\textsuperscript{590} One does not become better, she notes, by comparing oneself with anything other than the good. For this reason, it is imperative to develop a concept of the nation that is deliberately unattainable, yet compelling enough to hold our attention and give us something to love and to have as our telos.

Weil also maintains, however, that there are definitive and concrete methods that can lead to positive changes in the political sphere and bring about a more just society. While she never abandons the stance that it is the individual applying herself in thought and action (or consenting to affliction) who serves as the locus of justice, and while she acknowledges that “[t]here is a conflict between the demand for purity of individual thinking—or, in [her] later writings, the uncreated portion of the human soul—and the necessity of defiling social action,”\textsuperscript{591} Weil nevertheless understands the importance of elaborating a theory of consensus-building by which nations and communities might engage in the political process without, however, denying the ever-present threat of the social. Indeed, Weil holds that the operation of some form of the volonté générale is crucial if the nation is to become a just and rooted polity that can resist the relentless pressure of the flow of power—a presence that never can be fully exorcised from the collective life, but which can be mitigated by the use of certain legitimate channels for achieving consensus. In fact, the goal for Weil is to be able to look upon the lawful constraints that emerge from a just political process and say, “It is lucky that there is a

\textsuperscript{590} After elaborating the liberating effects of a just society, Weil acknowledges, “The above picture, considered by itself, is, if possible, still farther removed from the actual conditions of human existence than is the fiction of the Golden Age. But, unlike that fiction, it is able to serve, by way of an ideal, as a standard for the analysis and evaluation of actual social patterns” (Weil, Oppression of Liberty, 100).

\textsuperscript{591} Moulakis, Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial, 191. He notes that Weil is “very much aware” of this conflict.
social order;” the alternative is a moribund or dead collectivity in which power is made to seem limitless and in which the tyrant is mad, while the slave is utterly degraded. In keeping with her focus on the individual as the principal moral and political agent, Weil holds that meaningful, genuine consensus can exist among individuals on account of the unity of reason and the disorder of passion or opinion. This notion, she explains, is derived from Rousseau’s general will, which is more complex than most people credit. Weil identifies two basic premises at the bottom of Rousseau’s concept of the general will:

First of all, that reason discerns and chooses justice and utility in balanced and neutral fashion, while the motive force of passion lies behind every crime. Secondly, that reason is identical among all human beings, whereas the passions are very often different. It follows that if, regarding a general problem, each individual reflects on her own and expresses an opinion, and if these opinions are then compared to each other, they will likely be congruent at the just and reasonable parts, and be different where injustice and error are concerned. It’s only on account of this kind of reason that one can accept that a universal consensus is indicative of the truth.\(^{593}\)

Weil’s Platonism—and indeed, also her Kantianism—is apparent here in her reading of Rousseau on reason as a tool for approaching truth by sifting out the error that arises from the passions. And yet, her account of the way that political consensus might be achieved is less dogmatic on the issues of truth and pluralism than seems at first to be the case. It is not entirely fair to claim that her political schema considers anything that is not pure reason to be arbitrary and irrational, nor that this hyper-emphasis on reason makes “pluralism of any kind…unthinkable”;\(^{594}\) particularly given an author who so readily finds truth in such a broad range of cultures, languages, texts, and peoples, and who

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\(^{592}\) Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 17.

\(^{593}\) Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, 128. Translation mine, emphasis Weil’s.

argues so fiercely that “rendering equality compatible with differentiation” is essential for a just political sphere.\(^{595}\)

Where Weil pushes her reading of the individual and reason beyond anything envisioned by Rousseau—or by Kant or Plato, for that matter—is in her concept of decreation. In her earlier political thought from the era of Réflexions and the Journal d’Usine, the “fundamentally...Enlightenment vision”\(^{596}\) of the reasoning individual bringing thought and action together through labor is at the forefront. She writes of “one single and identical reason for all men” and explains that the collective life of free laborers working co-operatively “would always be in accordance with the general will” because “each individual would be in a position to exercise control over the collective life as a whole.”\(^{597}\) However, even at this early stage in Weil’s life, the rationalist project she envisions has as its goal, not the enshrinement of the autonomous individual for its own sake, but rather, the love for the other that becomes possible only when the attention can be activated and engaged by means of the self-forgetfulness of non-acting action. In a society where work is organized according to the mutualist and anarchist principles she posits, “[m]en would, it is true, be bound by collective ties, but exclusively in their capacity as men; they would never be treated by each other as things. Each would see in

\(^{595}\) Weil writes, “Equality is all the greater in proportion as different human conditions are regarded as being, not more nor less than one another, but simply as other. Let us look on the professions of miner and minister simply as two different vocations, like those of poet and mathematician. And let the material hardships attaching to the miner’s condition be counted in honor of those who undergo them... Such a balance constitutes an equality. There would be equality in social conditions if this balance could be found therein. It would mean honoring each human condition with those marks of respect which are proper to it, and are not just a hollow pretense” (Weil, The Need for Roots, 18-9). This has important implications, for instance, for the position of many feminists that domestic labor is significantly undervalued by society, and that superficial gestures which idealize and laud motherhood in fact represent precisely the kind of “hollow pretense” Weil decries, and that genuine equality in which differentiation is not only permitted but also celebrated can be present in socio-political life only when different vocations are made available to men and women alike, regardless of sex, and are considered genuinely valuable to society.

\(^{596}\) Blum and Seidler, A Truer Liberty, 102.

\(^{597}\) Weil, Oppression and Liberty, 99.
every work-fellow another self occupying another post, and would love him in the way that the Gospel maxim enjoins.”

This love permits human beings to experience something Weil considers even rarer than liberty: true friendship. This early formulation stops short of the radicality of Weil’s later insistence upon a decreation which leaves nothing of the self intact, and which dissolves anything that might be considered essential selfhood into the pure relationality of a redeemed necessity, offering instead the more moderate language of seeing one’s fellow worker as “another self” and the possibility that friendship might exist on the basis an equality brought about through the proper and just arrangement of social and political structures. This formulation also maintains the centrality and the singularity of reason, and sees in its operation in the individual engaged in labor the hope for a collective life that is able to resist the objectification and dehumanization that are consistent features of the socio-political sphere. Yet even here, Weil’s insistence that it is love of the other that should be the true end of freedom and of labor, and the true mark of a just polity, is a theme that is present from beginning to end in Weil’s writings on politics, and as we shall see, it forces a reconsideration of what appears to be her Enlightenment-style individualism and rationalism.

Critics of Weil’s stress on the role of the reasoning individual argue that every action in Weil’s vision of the just society depends in the end upon the rational coordination of individual actions, and that the rigidity of this individualistic framework precludes any genuine form of social organization outside of a kind of alliance of atomic entities pursuing a common goal determined by a univocal reason. What is more, claims McLellan, although Weil clearly draws upon Rousseau in developing her political theory—he calls attention to their shared picture of the pact of the individual with the

598 Ibid., 100.
universe, the contrast between slavery and freedom, and the centrality of labor and education for both—she allows insufficient room in her sketch of a free society for “mutual sympathy and moral aspiration as important factors in human interaction.” In similar fashion, Moulakis argues that Weil’s classical notion that the *principium individuationis* considered as a departure from reason accounts for error means that any form of emotion is necessarily and categorically excluded from Weil’s conception of a legitimate political consensus, resulting in a kind of “rationalist gnosticism” that risks reducing the content of political life—laws, intersubjective discourse, substantive deliberation, and the like—to mere method.

Yet, in the context of Weil’s thought, this sort of criticism itself errs in too confidently locating the possibility for communal and political development in the human capacity for something like sympathy or compassion, or that ability to feel pity for another’s plight—what Rousseau calls “the pure emotion of nature, prior to all kinds of reflection…[and] which the greatest depravity of morals has as yet hardly been able to destroy!” Indeed, he claims that it is from an innate and natural feeling of compassion that all social virtues spring, and that it is in fact reason and not feeling which allows human beings to deny the force of compassion and which prevents them from acting in solidarity with others on the basis of compassion:

> What is generosity, clemency, or humanity but compassion applied to the weak, to the guilty, or to mankind in general? Even benevolence and friendship are, if we judge rightly, only the effects of compassion, constantly set upon a particular object… Compassion must, in fact, be the stronger, the more the animal beholding any kind of distress identifies himself with the animal that suffers… [I]t is reason which turns man’s mind back upon itself, and divides him from everything that could disturb or afflict him. It is philosophy that isolates him,

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600 See Moulakis, *Simone Weil and the Politics of Self-Denial*, 164.
Weil concurs that this ability to feel compassion or pity for others rests upon an even more primordial human ability—even a tendency—to identify others with ourselves and to see their existence and interpret their actions in terms of our own existence and our own actions. And while she acknowledges that the result of such an identification is on many occasions an act of charity or a desire to repair an injustice, she remains deeply suspicious of the motive, which, on account of its root in a feeling, lacks the purity and clarity of a just act deriving from a motive-less, decretive attention.

It is not that Weil wishes to hold up the Enlightenment version of autonomy and individuality—with the concomitant emphasis on universal rationality—as the only proper modus vivendi or identity for the politically engaged human being. While it is true that her choice of maxims at the beginning of Réflexions—Spinoza’s famous dictum celebrating understanding and Marcus Aurelius’ celebration of reason—suggests that Weil esteems reason as crucial for the establishment of a just society, the idea that reason alone permits the institution of the political milieu and the coming-into-being of the volonté générale is not, in the end, the foundation-stone of Weil’s political project. In fact, for Weil, it is love, not reason, that permits the human being to attend to what is just, and it is love and not naked reason that in the end serves as the impetus behind any individual who is capable of engaging in political life while resisting the drive to dominate and oppress (if she has power) or to be servile and passive (if she lacks it). Love for the other and compassion for the fragility of one’s patrie are at the root of Weil’s political thought, whether it is a question of arriving at a political consensus that

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602 Ibid., 75.
does the least violence to the greatest needs of the most people, or a question of fulfilling one’s moral obligation to another individual in one’s immediate vicinity.\footnote{Weil connects the political dispensation of obligations with the individual moral obligation by arguing that no human being can escape being bound by the obligations she names in \textit{The Need for Roots} “save where there are two genuine obligations which are in fact incompatible, and a man is forced to sacrifice one of them. The imperfections of a social order can be measured by the number of situations of this kind it harbors within itself” (Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}, 4).} Indeed, according to Weil, authentic justice is nothing other than love or compassion, properly understood: “Christ does not call his benefactors loving or charitable. He calls them just. The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbor and justice… Only the absolute identification of justice and love makes the coexistence possible of compassion and gratitude on the one hand, and on the other, of respect for the dignity of affliction in the afflicted.”\footnote{Weil, \textit{Waiting for God}, 139-140.} She values compassion highly, claiming it as “the only just love.”\footnote{Weil, \textit{First and Last Notebooks}, 95.} However, Weil finds problematic any uncritical assertion that this is so, because \textit{in extremis}, when a polity is pushed into any sort of crisis or any difficulty which threatens the community, relying on a force rooted ultimately in the passions in order to form a just consensus or to distribute resources and meet the needs of its members becomes a dangerous risk. For Weil, Rousseau is correct in thinking that the feeling of compassion is strengthened by the ability to identify with the one who is suffering; the problem with this notion of identification is that she thinks Burke is also correct in claiming, “To love the little platoon to which we belong in society is the first, the germ as it were, of public affections.”\footnote{Edmund Burke, \textit{The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke: The French Revolution, 1790-1794}, ed. Paul Langford and L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 97.} To make love and compassion in themselves the ground of the political milieu without enclosing them critically as Weil does in the strict borders of her decretive anthropology is to risk substituting preference for justice, thereby
rendering justice only to those with whom one can readily identify, or who qualify—by appealing to one’s sensibility—as objects worthy of justice. She observes, “Among human beings, only the existence of those we love is fully recognized.” This is precisely the problem, Weil thinks, and it is why those who wish to classify Weil’s ethical and political thought as something akin to either feminist care ethics or virtue-based communitarian ethics, while not wholly off the mark, have nevertheless failed to take into account the vehemence with which Weil protests any form of partisanship or preference for one’s “little platoon.”

According to Weil, love can only be considered commensurate with justice when it has been purified of the ego’s spurious subjectivity and the “should-not-be” of the emotions, however noble one may consider a particular emotion (such as love) to be. Until the illusion of the substantial self is undone, the love one has for one’s nation or for another person is necessarily compromised, since, according to Weil (who was drawn to the line in the Iliad about the dead warriors left unburied who were so recently mourned), “[w]e love in the same way as we eat—and when we no longer find anything to feed on in a person, we leave him to those who can still find something there to devour: the voracious ‘love’ of the vultures succeeds the worn-out love of the wives…” The same carnivorous character belongs to the malformed state; instead of fostering roots for its citizens, it consumes its citizens as resources, cannibalizing itself and transforming everything it touches into a reserve to be utilized. The difficulty, explains Weil, is that

607 Weil, Gravity and Grace, 56.
608 For a discussion of Weil’s similarity to care ethicists such as Nel Noddings, Sarah Ruddick, and Carole Gilligan, see Bell’s The Way of Justice as Compassion, Ch. 5. Bell’s treatment is quite nuanced, and he attends to the differences between Weil’s perspective and that of the care ethicists, as well as the similarities.
love and justice can only be given their proper determinations by “readings,” by which she means the kind of concretized perceptions of the world around us in which we are always and already experiencing and responding to life’s situations. To read others and our surroundings justly is in fact nothing less than to attend to them. Yet the possibility always exists that our reading of others will be unjust or oppressive; indeed, this is sure to be the case if the falsely autonomous ego is not divested of its substantialist illusions, or if the individual is too mired in the collective to perceive things clearly:

Justice. To be ever ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in him. Every being cries out silently to be read differently. We read, but also we are read by, others. Interferences in these readings. Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest)... Charity and injustice can only be defined by readings, and thus no definition fits them... Who can flatter himself that he will read aright?... What love of justice is a guarantee against a bad reading?... Causes of wrong reading: public opinion, the passions.

Reading someone aright, for Weil, is directing one’s attention to that person’s situation, such that one is able to see the person as he is, and not as we think he is or want him to be in order to fulfill our desires or satisfy our appetites. It is to become in that situation nothing other than the channel or relation through which authentic justice can flow. Recall that in the context of Weil’s metaphysics, one cannot but be a pure relation—a segment of the web of necessity which constitutes the universe. In acknowledging this fact and consenting to its consequences—namely, the decreation of the illusory self—one becomes capable of seeing through the screen of selfhood that formerly corrupted proper readings so as to read properly—justly and lovingly and with attention—the existence of others. As Eric Springsted writes, Weil’s political project is not “trying to create ideal

610 Weil, Gravity and Grace, 121-2.
political situations that are objectively fair and fitted to human ‘nature’, but… trying to make people fair and just who are already socially related… The point then of political philosophy for Weil is to make the relation [of mutual attending] apparent and central in any state, and to arrange the relations within any political and social association so that these relations may be advanced to the greatest degree possible.”

According to Weil, compassion—once purified of its natural tendency to identify with another to such an extent that the concrete existence and particularity of the other is lost—“is able…to cross frontiers, extend itself over all countries in misfortune, over all countries without exception; for all peoples are subjected to the wretchedness of our human condition.”

Precisely at this point, we see the intersection in Weil’s political thought between a universal movement in the direction of a justice which can be applied to all human beings and to every nation by virtue of their status as human beings and as nations, and a particularizing movement in the direction of a political milieu constructed on a foundation of love, attention and the ethical interrelation among individuals. What Weil is advocating, then, is neither a straightforwardly rationalist schema in which reason is employed to develop a universal political framework that can be abstracted from particular nations and people, nor a purely particularist schema in which personal relations or ethical interactions among small groups of people form the sole basis of a political framework. Instead, she puts forward the concept of an impersonal love which serves as the foundation of a just political milieu focused, not upon the protection of the rights of individuals or groups, but rather, upon the balancing of human needs and the obligations to meet those needs. However, the concept of an impersonal love suggests

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two problems. To begin with, how can something like love, which by convention rests upon the very particular and personal attachment one person has for another person or object, be considered in any way impersonal? Would the concept of an impersonal love evacuate the significance and purpose of love? And more importantly for political theory, is it legitimate or even possible to make love the foundation of justice, or is love inimical to political life—something pertaining to private, interpersonal morality but wholly separable from issues such as legality, representation, and the general will—as someone like Hannah Arendt argues, in a political tradition arguably going back to John Locke and Samuel Pufendorf?613

V. An Impersonal Love: Unconditional Obligations versus Universal Rights

In order to understand what Weil means by advocating an impersonal love as the grounds for a new and revivified political order, her espousal of the preeminence of obligations over and against rights must be examined. Weil, in her essay “Human Personality” and in The Need for Roots, connects the concept of the person with that of rights, and rejects them both in favor of a theory of obligations and needs.614 The linkage of rights and persons is not a novel idea in the history of modern political thought, much of which considers persons to be the possessors of rights, and rights to be the claims made by persons (whether “person” is conceptualized morally or legally). Weil opposes

613 Pufendorf, like Locke, distinguishes charity from justice: “[H]e has such a Right over his own Goods, as shall in some measure prevail even against a Person in extreme necessity: So far at least as that he shall have the Privilege of judging, whether the Man be an Object worthy of his Relief or not; that it may be in his Power to oblige and win a necessitous Person by his seasonable Succours; For nothing raises the value of a Kindness so much as its being done for the Removal of an extreme Distress. But all this Merit and Obligation is cut off, when we give another, only what he might otherwise, as his own Right and Due, violently take from us.” Samuel Pufendorf, Of the Law of Nature and Nations, trans. B. Kennet (London: Sare, 1717), II.vi, 6.
614 “The notion of rights, by its very mediocrity, leads on naturally to that of the person, for rights are related to personal things” (Weil, “Human Personality,” Simone Weil Reader, 326).
rights on account of the way they are construed as possessions: “Rights, for Weil, have a commercial flavor; they are the personal properties or negotiable demands that constitute the legal and moral basis of market societies.” They are wedded to the specific situation of the rights-claimant and are always related to particular, contingent historical and political conditions. Even the language used to discuss rights—they are claimed or asserted or insisted upon—suggests contention and perhaps threat, since, as Weil observes, it is useless to insist upon one’s rights if there is no force in the background to help one lay claim to them. For Weil, rights-language is disingenuous, because it masks the conversion of an absolute or inalienable right into an alienable property which can then be traded or bargained away in the marketplace. As Edward Andrew explains,

Personal rights are the right privatized, individualized and relativized as my rights, your rights, her rights… Personal pronouns modifying right transform what is by nature a collective property (the right or the law), not subject to trade or bargaining, into the very stuff of bargains or trade-offs. For Weil, the rights-based society is founded on the politics of property where the holdings of one powerful group are traded off in exchange for mutual renunciation (or compromise) of the holdings of other powerful groups. Weil’s uncompromising view asserts that rights-based society is the consensual society where everything is freely vendible…where nothing is held sacred or inalienable.

The notion that a right is something possessed by a person, together with the notion that what belongs to the person is alienable, mean for Weil that rights lack the capacity on their own—that is, divorced from obligations—to mediate justice in the political sphere. Rights are wholly contingent; there is nothing inherent in the concept that guarantees they will be respected or recognized by others. Precisely because they are attached to persons as unique personalities, and because the status of personhood can be defined legally in a variety of ways or denied to certain people or groups of people depending on the political regime, rights lack purchase in a world where power is brokered in the marketplace, and

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615 Andrew, “The Injustice of Rights-Based Doctrines,” 77.
616 Ibid., 65.
where there is little that the less powerful can do to force those more powerful to respect their rights. What is more, rights must be claimed if they are to be valid; the notion of claiming one’s rights depends upon the capacity to speak, which is a capacity that those who are afflicted do not possess. This is because “[a]ffliction by its nature is inarticulate. The afflicted silently beseech to be given the words to express themselves.”617 In a world in which necessity in the form of power governs all human relationships, it is foolhardy to expect competing rights claims to be settled in such a way that natural justice—dependent as it is upon a naturally-occurring equilibrium between two parties—is made manifest. There is almost never a situation in which power is naturally at an absolute equilibrium. The “political marketplace” in which rights claims operate is not, Weil thinks, an adequate mechanism for engineering the kinds of social and political relationships in which imbalances of power can be equalized. The world is “a restless unstable network of domination and resistance, with the strong never as powerful as they imagine and the weak never as powerless as they imagine.”618 Weil contends that, in such a context, rights cannot effect the power balance and provide the political stability they are meant to do. The assertion of rights—with the suggestion of force that necessarily accompanies such an assertion if it is to meet with success—is connected ineluctably to power, and not to love or charity. When one claims a right, it is always done with the marketplace of power in mind; the operative metaphor (as Weil herself points out) is of a cake, and when one person or group insists upon the right to a larger share, that increase necessarily means a decrease for another person or group.619 By

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618 Andrew, “The Injustice of Rights-Based Doctrines,” 69.
619 “This profound and childlike and unchanging expectation of good in the heart is not what is involved when we agitate for our rights. The motive which prompts a little boy to watch jealously to see if his
arguing that obligations to others are paramount in the political arena, rather than rights for oneself and against others, Weil shifts the domain in which justice can be enacted from that of power to that of love.

Despite Weil’s claim that obligations “belong to a realm…situated above this world,” her shift from rights to obligations, and from power to love, ought not to be interpreted as a purely mystical appeal to the supernatural realm over and against the natural realm, nor in advocating such a shift does Weil intend to abolish the rule of law; on this point she is aligned with Rousseau when she maintains that the difference between a slave and a citizen is the difference between submitting to a master and to the rule of law. Even if the master is very kind, writes Weil, and the laws are very harsh, the difference between particularity and caprice on the one hand and the limits of law on the other is “the whole point.” Indeed, she considers the foremost need of the soul to be order, which she defines as “a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones.” Nor does Weil wish to abrogate all rights, since she thinks they serve a purpose within the political milieu, so long as one recognizes that “the effective exercise of a right spring[s] not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being

brother has a slightly larger piece of cake arises from a much more superficial level of the soul. The word justice means two very different things according to whether it refers to the one or the other level. It is only the former one that matters” (Weil, “Human Personality,” Simone Weil Reader, 315.

621 Weil, First and Last Notebooks, 19.
622 Weil, The Need for Roots, 10. Interestingly, and in keeping with her position that political utopias are to be understood as regulative ideals, she notes that at the present time, and throughout most of human history, social and political life has been structured in such a way that a vast number of obligations are made incompatible. “Unfortunately,” she writes, “we possess no method for diminishing this incompatibility. We cannot even be sure that the idea of an order in which all obligations would be compatible with one another isn’t itself a fiction. When duty descends to the level of facts, so many independent relationships are brought into play that incompatibility seems far more likely than compatibility” (Weil, The Need for Roots, 10).
under a certain obligation toward him.”

Weil maintains that the recognition of the existence of unconditional obligations does not require a supernatural belief in some otherworldly realm; while their status as unconditional makes the search for their worldly foundation a fruitless one, nevertheless they have “a verification in the common consent accorded by the universal conscience. It finds expression in some of the oldest written texts which have come down to us. It is recognized by everybody without exception in every single case where it is not attacked as a result of interest or passion.”

Obligations are unconditional and impersonal and they subtend personal rights, which are conditionally constituted by legitimate governments, which in turn draw their legitimacy from the extent to which they permit the maximal fulfillment of obligations. Rights depend upon the conditions in which they arise: “the will of the contracting parties…the level of economic, military and communications technology…the balance of power between the claimants…,” the particularities of the claimants’ personalities and the social prestige attaching to those personalities. They take the form of demands or desires rather than of genuine, limited needs (to which obligations are directed), and thus they have to do with what is personal and particular. In calling obligations impersonal, Weil does not mean that fulfilling obligations requires one to abstract from the concrete context in which both the need and the obligation to fulfill that need exist: “All human beings are bound by identical obligations, although these are performed in different ways according to particular circumstances.”

More importantly, Weil’s concept of impersonal here has nothing to do with being uncaring or indifferent to those who are

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623 Ibid., 3.
624 Ibid., 5.
625 Andrew, “The Injustice of Rights-Based Doctrines,” 74.
626 Weil, The Need for Roots, 4.
suffering. On the contrary, justice made manifest through meeting unconditional and impersonal obligations is, for Weil, coextensive with authentic love in a way that justice which obtains naturally or by way of rights never can be. As Weil observes,

If you say to someone who has ears to hear: ‘What you are doing to me is not just,’ you may touch and awaken at its source the spirit of attention and love. But it is not the same with words like ‘I have the right…’ or ‘you have no right to…’ They evoke a latent war and awaken the spirit of contention. To place the notion of rights at the centre of social conflicts is to inhibit any possible impulse of charity on both sides.  

The personal self-assertion that is required in order to insist upon one’s rights is inimical to the kind of self-forgetful attention that plays out in the fulfilling of an obligation to another human being. As a corollary, what is sacred about a human being—what constitutes the source of the obligation owed by one human being to another—is not her ego, her personality, or the self which insists upon its rights. The self, for Weil, represents a surplus value, a should-not-be which, when pushed forward, can only impede the ability to attend to the needs of others: “If a child is doing a sum and does it wrong, the mistake bears the stamp of his personality. If he does the sum exactly right, his personality does not enter into it at all. Perfection is impersonal. Our personality is the part of us which belongs to error and sin. The whole effort of the mystic has always been to become such that there is no part left in his soul to say ‘I.’”

So long as the self falsely occupies a central point from which it arranges the world and the people around it according to its own desires and demands, that self will remain blind to the obligations it owes, caught up in passion or self-interest.

The concept of an impersonal love, then, is not a contradiction in terms; rather, it is Weil’s manner of accounting for the fact that justice can only be present alongside

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628 Ibid., 318.
authentic love, and authentic love exists only when it has been evacuated of the personal, both on the part of the one who loves, and the beloved. To want justice for another human being is to want that human being to exist in and for herself rather than as a means of serving one’s own interests. “Love and justice—To be just towards a being different from oneself means putting oneself in his place. For then one recognizes his existence as a person, not as a thing. This means a spiritual quartering, a stripping of the self; conceiving oneself as oneself and as other.”⁶²⁹ This “stripping of the self”—decreation, as Weil usually calls it—requires one to give up personal preferences, attachments, and admiration for those who possess social prestige. It involves instead a self-forgetful attention to the unconditional obligations that are owed to another human purely on the basis of her humanity, and not on account of her particular personality, the noise and articulateness with which she claims her rights, or the personal or social power she is (or is not) able to bring to bear in her demand for justice. To be able to attend to another person in such a fashion is to render both love and justice present in the world. This is not an annulment of Weil’s emphasis on the importance of the individual’s ability to unite the intellect with the body in work, since the goal of such a process is likewise the self-forgetfulness of decreation. Nor is it a revocation of the high status she grants to the freedom of the intellect; rather, love in its manifestation as justice in a sense instructs and informs the intellect, such that it becomes capable of resisting the “gravity” of injustice and opens itself to a just and loving “reading” of others, without the fallacious, grasping ego as an obstacle. “When the intelligence, having become silent in order to let love invade the whole soul, begins once more to exercise itself, it finds it contains more light than before, a greater aptitude for grasping objects, truths that are proper to it. Better

⁶²⁹ Weil, Notebooks, vol. 1, 292.
still, I believe that these silences constitute an education for it which cannot possibly have any other equivalent and enable it to grasp truths which otherwise would forever remain hidden from it.\textsuperscript{630} The education of the intellect by love amounts to the cultivation of the capacity for attention. Only attention—whether it comes about through the self-forgetfulness of non-acting action in labor, or through the loving consent to necessity experienced as affliction—permits the falsely substantial self to be decreated and an impersonal love for the other to move into the world through the conduit of the emptied self. “It was Justice,” Weil writes, “companion of the gods in the other world, who dictated this surfeit of love.”\textsuperscript{631} Yet, even if the concept of an impersonal love is plausible, how can a love which seems to come from “the other world” sustain a just public and political life in this world?

VI. Personality and the Public Sphere: The Decreated Self as Political Agent

For Weil, there is significant slippage between the concept of “social” and that of “political”—a fact which she thinks can have only negative consequences for the political sphere, since “politics, like every human activity, is an activity directed toward a good objective”\textsuperscript{632}, while there is almost nothing redeeming to be found in the social sphere. Unlike politics, which ideally seeks to create and sustain a patrie that may provide roots for its citizens and hence may function as one of the primary metaxu, collective life “is not only alien to the sacred, but it deludes us with a false imitation of it.”\textsuperscript{633} Connected to this tendency to make an idol of the collective in which one is immersed is the tendency

\textsuperscript{631} Weil, “Human Personality,” \textit{Simone Weil Reader}, 325.
\textsuperscript{632} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}, 200.
to focus upon self-development or the expansion of one’s personality. As Weil observes, it is common to find the cult of the self coupled with a fixation upon the public taste, as with writers, celebrities, and even scientists who follow contemporary trends or disciplinary paradigms. The personal attachment to an egoist perspective that results in a cannibal-like consumption of others as personal resources and a domination over those who possess less social prestige goes hand-in-hand with the desire for ever-greater social prestige and a longing for more power in the context of the collective life of the social sphere. There is no easy line that can be drawn for Weil between what counts as personal and private on the one hand, and what counts as public or collective on the other, since the freedom of every individual is constrained by the “mechanical fact” of “the subordination of the person to the collectivity.” And while political life in its ideal form serves as a buffer between the individual and the collective by offering institutions and customs that can be loved and can mediate justice and truth in the world, very often it exists in a degraded form—particularly when it is a question of competing political parties which exacerbate the distortions and criminalities of social life in general.

Like Weil, Hannah Arendt argues that there has been a slippage between the concepts of the social and the political, a process which Arendt claims has its beginnings in modernity. According to Arendt, this has occurred in part because the ancient Greek distinction between the private oikos and the public polis has become blurred since the rise of the modern era. For Arendt, the public arena is rightly the backdrop against which political life—“the common world [that] gathers us together and yet prevents our falling

\[634\text{ Ibid.} \]
\[635\text{ Ibid.} \]
over each other”—plays out, and yet it is precisely this function of the public realm to gather and to separate appropriately which has been partly obliterated by the ascendance of the social in modernity. The social, which Arendt thinks has wrongly come to stand in for the political in so many ways, is actually connected closely, not to the public sphere as one might be inclined to think, but rather, to the private sphere; in effect, she argues, with modernity, the social began to absorb the private sphere of the oikos, such that “society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family.” In fact, claims Arendt, the social is not at all coextensive with the political, but rather, expands at the expense of the public (and hence, the political). The problem with the opening out of the private realm into the social realm is that, unlike the public nature of political life in premodernity, the forms of political life that develop out of the social bring elements that are properly understood as private into politics. These private elements do not belong by rights to the political arena, and hence they are not really capable, argues Arendt, of doing the work of politics; that is, of allowing human beings to live together in the world they have created. It is not that Arendt considers private concerns to be irrelevant for human life. Some private concerns are very relevant, indeed, and yet they lack the engagement with the world that marks those concerns which are important for public, political life. The chief example Arendt provides of such a humanly relevant yet “worldless” and private concern is love, which “can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world.” Merely expanding such private concerns until they form the tissue of

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637 Ibid., 192.
638 Ibid., 200.
social life is not sufficient to transform them into public concerns, since they still operate in terms of privacy, intimacy, and a lack of participation in the common world. It is worth quoting Arendt at length on this point:

Historically, we know of only one principle that was ever devised to keep a community of people together who had lost their interest in the common world… To find a bond between people strong enough to replace the world was the main political task of early Christian philosophy, and it was Augustine who proposed to found not only the Christian ‘brotherhood’ but all human relationships on charity. But this charity, though its worldlessness clearly corresponds to the general human experience of love, is at the same time clearly distinguished from it in being something which, like the world, is between men… [T]he bond of charity between people, while it is incapable of founding a public realm of its own, is quite adequate to the main Christian principle of worldlessness and is admirably fit to carry a group of essentially worldless people through the world, a group of saints or a group of criminals, provided only it is understood that the world itself is doomed and that every activity in it is undertaken with the proviso quamdiu mundus durat.639

Thus, Arendt’s view of the ability of love (or even more broadly, charity) to constitute political life is clearly opposed to Weil’s. As Mary Dietz argues, Weil’s metaphors for a just political collective in The Need for Roots are organic, personal, and familial. “Under the force of these conceptions, the personal and the political, the familial and the public, become one and the same; thus, the special distinctiveness of that which is public and political is lost.”640 Dietz, following Arendt, argues that this collapsing of the public into the private is dangerous, since it diminishes the significance of the political as a public space of interaction, and renders private virtues such as love and obedience more important than public virtues such as persuasion and the exercise of liberty. For Arendt, love can never be a political virtue, because it cannot operate in or help to construct a public space that facilitates political interaction. Arendt likens such a space to a table, because it serves as a medium by which people are both brought together and kept at an

639 Ibid., 201-2.
640 Dietz, Between the Human and the Divine, 186.
appropriately public distance—something that is inimical to the personal intimacy suggested by love, charity, and compassion. More importantly for Arendt is the fear that a political space which relies on private emotions such as compassion in order to exist is bound in the end to eschew the public virtues of tolerance, persuasion, deliberative debate, and compromise in favor of a mandate to ameliorate society’s injustices straightaway—often using violent means on account of the perceived urgency of the injustices and the strength of a private virtue writ large upon the social. She contends that political morality—if indeed “morality” is an appropriate term in such a context—must come into being from within the public space rather than being imposed heteronomously from other domains such as religion.641

Just as Weil’s political thought rests upon the claims she makes about a decreative anthropology, so also does Arendt’s own anthropology provide the background for her position that the political can take place only in a public space. According to Arendt, the public realm is the space of appearance, where human beings act, speak, and appear before others. Arendt’s point is to resist a traditional ontological anthropology in which appearance is somehow less substantial than reality, of which the appearance can only ever be a dim representation or an incomplete participation. Appearances for Arendt are reality; their capacity to change or their lack of stability cannot be attributed to an imperfect imitation of reality, but rather, to the fact that identities are formed in the process of appearing to others and in concrete yet perspectively plural and changeable contexts. As Arendt explains, in the public realm, everything that appears

641 For more on this point, see Arendt’s treatment of Jesus in Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1959), 214-9; see also her analysis of a love for the good in “The Public and the Private Realm,” 216-ff.
can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance… The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves.  

There is no opposition for Arendt between some inner reality—a soul or a mental space or a self—and an outward appearance which either hides or projects that reality. As Andrea Nye explains, “There are ways we appear to others, and in addition and in relation there is an inner life of emotions and sensations which can never appear and which has no ‘objective’ existence… In Arendt’s view, no one can tell a woman what her sensation or emotion is, but she can’t know either.” It is not that Arendt wishes to deny the existence of something like an inner life; however, this inner life is something that remains shrouded in darkness. To bring it into the light of the public realm results in an exposure that distorts it. In any case, Arendt argues that the events of the inner life are not directly relevant to the public sphere, although, insofar as love helps humans engage in promising, forgiving, and speaking between equals, it “plays an indirect role” in some of the prerequisites of political life. The important thing for Arendt is the development, not of an introspective inner life (since this amounts to the creation of a category of things that can be “seen” and reflected upon by only one person instead of an experience of things held in common by humans together), but rather, of a stable, genuine self-identity that is based upon the human being’s freedom to appear in this or

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644 Ibid., 258, note 35.
645 In *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 92, Arendt argues that our interpretation of any object “is so bound up with the presence of others that we can never be sure of anything that only we ourselves know and no one else.”
that particular manner. “For Arendt, there is no self that is not a public self. The presentation of self is the primary reality and characteristic of self.” Thus, Arendt takes the position that how we choose to present ourselves to others is of the utmost importance for the construction of the political milieu. This means that, even when a private emotion like love “appears in the space where other activities are performed and depends upon it, [it] is of an actively negative nature; fleeing the world and hiding from its inhabitants, it negates the space the world offers to men, and most of all that public part of it where everything and everybody are seen and heard by others.” The point of the public space in which politics takes place is to appear—to speak and act—before others. Weil’s notion that justice is in reality a form of love from which all spurious egoism has been evacuated has no purchase in the political sphere as Arendt conceives it.

Yet on closer examination, Arendt’s depiction of the public space as a realm of appearances in which our own identity is called into existence in relation to those persons and things appearing around us, is perhaps not as far from Weil’s view of the world as one might think. According to Weil, “Necessity is the essence of the reality of the things of this world. In other words, their essence is a conditional one. Their essence lies in not being ends.” The flow of power constitutes reality for Weil; human beings are not discrete, autonomous, or substantial, but rather, possess a kind of non-being that is relational—and this is the case whether or not someone has experienced decreation. The difference between the non-being of the egoist self and the self which has been decreated has to do with the transparency of that relational status and the manner in which the self is oriented toward necessity. This orientation is, for Weil, the locus of human freedom.

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The capriciousness of power and the impossibly complex manner in which it flows and changes form and issues forth leads Weil to identify the unlimited as the characteristic of power which makes it so terrible.\textsuperscript{649} It is partly on this account that Weil rejects any system of thought—such as that of Marx or of Hegel—that claims to comprehend power and to schematize its movement through history. Like Weil, Arendt rejects what she considers simplistic accounts of the role of power in relation to causality. Arendt observes that,

\begin{quote}
Since we always act into a web of relationships, the consequences of each deed are boundless, every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction, every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes. This boundlessness is inescapable; it could not be cured by restricting one’s acting to a limited graspable framework or circumstances… The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness and unpredictability.\textsuperscript{650}
\end{quote}

What is more, Arendt claims that, outside the public “space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt.”\textsuperscript{651} The self, for Arendt, comes into being in the presence of others, in and through the public space that has reality by virtue of its “being common”—literally its common “interest” or inter esse.\textsuperscript{652} The self and the objects to which people refer exist because they are spoken of freely in the public space; they cannot truly be called real outside of the shared world which is constructed on the basis of communicative relationships. These relationships, constituted by action (a category which for Arendt includes and is even defined by speech acts),\textsuperscript{653} give substance and meaning to

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{649} See First and Last Notebooks, 17.
\textsuperscript{651} Arendt, The Human Condition, 187.
\textsuperscript{652} See The Human Condition, 162; cf. On Revolution, 81.
\textsuperscript{653} As Arendt explains, “Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must always also answer the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’ The disclosure
\end{footnotes}
individuals and objects, and in a sense they *are* their very substance and meaning.

“Words have substantive reference in the common world of relations that speakers are in the process of creating… [Objects] are objective only because they are things that are of ‘inter-est,’ literally ‘between us,’ constituted by relationships. They are not subjective because the relationships that constitute them are real; they are not fixed because the fact that there are objects between people creates new commonality and new objects of interest.”654 For both Arendt and Weil, then, the world and the human beings who live in it are constituted by relations, and those relations are the effects of action (in the case of Arendt) and force or power (in the case of Weil). For both thinkers, this web of relations is in some sense all there is; neither Arendt nor Weil believes that one can abstract from the sphere of appearances or the experience of embeddedness within this web in order to gain an objective perspective, or a “view from nowhere,” or a disembodied “reading” of reality.

Yet on Arendt’s account, the realm of appearances is the space in which political life— *bios politicos*—unfolds, in opposition to the bare givenness of life— *zoe*. As Arendt expresses it, “Every man, being created in the singular, is a new beginning by virtue of his birth; if Augustine had drawn the consequences of these speculations, he would have defined men, not, like the Greeks, as mortals, but as ‘natals.’”655 For Arendt, this concept of natality represents the human capacity for freedom and the power to speak and act: it is the beginning, or *initium* of the possibility of political life and the construction of a public

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space in which one person can appear to another. On account of natality, each human being possesses an equal ability to begin something new; it is natality which grounds Arendt’s primary distinction between the equality and freedom to act and appear which characterize political life in the public space, and the embodied differences and concomitant subjection to necessity which are hallmarks of the private sphere, or zoe. According to Arendt, “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world…” The purpose of the realm of appearances for Arendt is not merely to craft a public space in which political speech and action can take place; political life lived among equals “is valuable not only for what it achieves… but for its own sake… [P]olitical action manifests the actor’s capacity for freedom, demonstrates his equality with his peers, and discloses his unique identity—his ‘public self’—in myriad, unforeseeable ways.” It is in the course of political life that the promise of natality—freedom and the development of a unique identity—is actualized. Indeed, the freedom of political speech not only founds institutions and preserves polities, but grounds self-development and facilitates self-disclosure. For Arendt, to enter the public realm of appearances is to leave the private realm of necessity and to claim one’s identity as an equal and an individual.

This is in the end quite different from Weil’s view of political life, which, on account of the dangers of collective life always runs the risk of becoming the Great Beast—an amplification and intensification of the experience of necessity rather than a space in which necessity can be left behind. Moreover, for Weil, while freedom is crucial

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657 Arendt, The Human Condition, 159.
for the foundation and preservation of a just patrie, its role in these tasks is to consent to the emptying of the self, rather than to actualize the self. It is not by means of self-disclosure and the speech acts which enable such a process to take place that justice and equality can be secured within the collective, plural life of public space, according to Weil. While Arendt holds that action—that is, self-disclosure in the common space of political life—is the manifestation of freedom and a kind of “salvation” from the “ruin and destruction” of ordinary mortality, the notion that freedom somehow involves self-actualization is for Weil an illusion that fails to take seriously the extent to which power subverts and overtakes and undermines nearly all words and actions which are geared toward self-development. In and through the process of self-disclosure, equality is threatened, not brought into being. In Weil’s view, “For each man, himself is I and all others are the others. I, that is to say, the centre of the world; that central position is represented in space by perspective. The others, that is to say those portions of the universe more or less near to I, are for the most part of no importance.”

Arendt takes the position that, by means of a kind of free communicative practice in which individuals in the public space come to see matters “in the perspective of all who happen to be present,” the possibility exists for something she calls “representative thinking”—free and independent individuals attempting to think “with other people’s standpoints present” in their own minds. For Arendt, this possibility—something she sometimes calls “going visiting”—rests upon the twin principles of freedom and self-disclosure; while it is not a naïve assertion that “one can assimilate the other’s standpoint as if it were

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661 Ibid., 241-2.
possible to make oneself at home elsewhere,” Nevertheless it entails a belief that political thought (as opposed to private passion) somehow allows “being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not.” Yet it is not clear in Arendt’s vision of political life just how the public space, which is “constituted through the sameness of utter diversity,” is to be protected from the distortions that come into play whenever the self pursues the illusion that there are no significant constraints placed upon the freedom to speak and act.

It is not that Weil would reject the intention that lies behind Arendt’s notion of representative thinking; indeed, Weil, too, considers the recognition that another human being is a human being like oneself to be essential for the manifestation of justice in the political milieu. Yet for Weil, “[o]nly the true renunciation of the power to think of everything in the first person, the renunciation which is not a simple transference, grants to a man the knowledge that other men are his fellows.” In other words, there is nothing about the act of claiming or disclosing one’s identity, or about the act of speaking freely in the light of the public space, that encourages or even permits Arendt’s differentiated equality to come into being. While Weil has been criticized for a perceived lack of imagination when it comes to the richness and liberative potential that come from Arendt’s notion of sharing standpoints, in fact one might argue that Weil is not unaware of the need for seeing things from the perspective of others, and of the benefits which arise from such a shift in perspective. However, as Blum and Seidler state,

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664 Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights*, 64.
We are not helped to recognize the difficulties we face in doing so. We often become surprised at the rage and bitterness that underlay relationships of power and subordination; we cannot face the sufferings of the innocent. We fail to appreciate and even tend to minimize the injuries done to others... At best all we often do is pretend to listen, but really we do not want to know. We want to keep this affliction at a safe distance for we sense that it would cost us a great deal to open up to it.

Weil’s analysis of power as maximally expansive, and her assessment of the human being as engaged in a desperate quest for substantiality and self-assertion at the expense of others, help illuminate the problem with the idea that, simply by entering into the political life, one can escape necessity and can engage in the kind of representative thinking that brings equality into existence. It is perhaps the case that the consolidation of selfhood that takes place in Arendt’s realm of appearance—the play of personae and the “disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is”—is not the kind of selfhood that seeks to exercise power over others or to occupy a falsely substantialist position at the center of the universe. Indeed, one can argue with Dietz that Arendt’s concept of the human being as a self-disclosive agent and a courageous actor on the public stage serves “as a powerful and compelling rebuke to the living death and deathly life” of the Holocaust and other horrors of the twentieth century, in which arguably the problem for political life is not self-assertion but the total disintegration of agency and human wholeness. Yet Weil’s assessment of power remains valid; speech acts in the public sphere are never really free from the constraints of necessity, and they cannot guarantee that equality will be the outcome.

The idea which perhaps exhibits most clearly the difference between Arendt and Weil on the role of self is that of immortality. Arendt bemoans the fact that immortality

in today’s world has been classified as a form of vanity: “There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality.” She considers the desire for immortality to be one of the preeminent motives in premodernity for men to enter the public realm, since it represents the wish for “something of their own…to be more permanent than their earthly lives.” Weil, however, forcefully resists the idea of immortality and the notion that legitimate political continuity—of which she approves—is in any way tied to the self’s ability to render permanent some contribution it has made in the political milieu. Instead, she holds up anonymity as the most appropriate way that one can serve one’s patrie: “The historical facts: Those men whose names have come down to us have gained fame by means of the great beast. Those whom it does not make famous continue unknown to their contemporaries and to all posterity.” Justice and equality can be made present for Weil, not via the rhetoric of political speech or the self-disclosure that reveals the political actor, but by means of non-acting action, a renunciation of prestige and the products of one’s speech and work, and an attention to the other which arises only out of a self-forgetful love. This love is neither apolitical nor otherworldly, nor does it negate “the space the world offers to men;” it is for Weil the same thing as justice, and it has a place in the political milieu, since “society is the concrete location in which justice is actualized.” To be sure, it is a love grounded in mysticism, and which owes much to the action of grace in and through the process of decreation. Yet, Weil insists that

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671 Ibid.
674 Sladkovic, Warten auf Gott, 280. Translation mine.
justice—a love for the good—is present in the world, if only we can learn to love provisionally, partially, with the self emptied of its craving for power:

If pure good were never capable of producing on this earth true greatness in art, science, theoretical speculation, public enterprise, if in all these spheres there were only false greatness, if in all these spheres everything were despicable, and consequently condemnable, there would be no hope at all for the affairs of this world; no possible illumination of this world by the other one. But it is not so; which is why it is absolutely necessary to distinguish true from false greatness, and to set up the former only as an object of love.\textsuperscript{675}

\textsuperscript{675} Weil, \textit{The Need for Roots}, 237.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Justice is *love under conditions of conflict*. If love is the practice of *difference as relation*, love characterizes the spirit. Con/spiring in the differentiation of the universe, this public spirit immerses all becoming-subjects in their *shared future*: not necessarily a reassuring prospect, but a collective process of infinite reciprocations and devastating sensitivities. That process goes on before and after any particular life. Its demanding publicity, however, does not replace or relieve our psychic depth. From the depths we cry…  

Keller’s definition of justice—love under conditions of conflict—is very much aligned with Simone Weil’s. Like Keller, who links a love that recognizes difference-in-relation with the suffering which causes us to cry out from the depths, Weil, too, understands justice and love, suffering and relation, to be intimately connected. Invoking the Gospels as the site at which this connection is most forcefully evident, Weil claims that

the understanding of human suffering is dependent upon justice, and love is its condition. Whoever does not know just how far necessity and a fickle fortune hold the human soul under their domination cannot treat as his equals, nor love as himself, those whom chance has separated from him by an abyss… Only he who knows the empire of might and knows how not to respect it is capable of justice and love.  

Keller’s vision of justice as a shared future, a collective process through which the uncountable interpenetrations of relation-in-difference simultaneously constrain us as they check our spontaneity and free us to attend to the world, is not unlike Weil’s own account of what justice might look like if it is understood, not in terms of the exercise of

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power, but rather, as the freely-given and loving attention to others in the context of a necessity which never ceases to limit us.

Where Weil’s emphasis differs from Keller’s, however, is in the deeper suspicion Weil holds concerning the “conditions of conflict” which make love and justice so very difficult for even the best-intentioned individuals. In assessing these conditions of conflict—the interconnected web of which she names necessity—Weil refuses to give quarter to the comforting illusion that we are entirely free to reshape reality by our choices, or that we can transcend its constraints by means of a grand gesture of faith: “People who make athletic leaps toward heaven are too absorbed in the muscular effort to be able to look up to heaven; and in this matter the looking up is the one that counts.”678 Instead, as she observes, it is the looking that counts most; that is, the orientation we have toward the Good and toward the other, toward God and toward our neighbor, that in the end ushers in justice as love.

To be sure, the looking—attention—is not everything for Weil, or at least, it is neither the beginning of justice, nor the end of it, but rather, the means by which it makes its presence felt in the realm of the everyday; it is the middle term in the equation that moves from subjectivity to justice. For those who think of justice in a more straightforwardly political fashion, however, Weil’s notion might seem like a kind of antipolitical quietism. Such people “will have difficulty simply understanding, much less accepting, the premise that right political action should begin with—and might never move beyond—a mediatative attention and quiet waiting…for the truth.”679 Yet it is not entirely fair to say that, for Weil, justice is merely a matter of attending, exclusively a

matter of looking. Rather, the capacity to attend is something that must be activated by an encounter with reality of some sort—with a beauty so striking that one has no desire to alter anything about it, or with labor in which one’s desire to control the process and possess the finished product is short-circuited by an embodied thought-in-action, or with an affliction through which one’s physical contact with reality is preeminent. When this happens—when desires are detached from the objects they seek to possess, and when the avaricious, intentional subject consents to abstain from consuming others as fuel for those desires—then the self undergoes decreation, and only then is the capacity to attend actualized.

According to Weil, decreation and attention form a bridge between love and justice, such that the attentive love offered to the other by the decreated and emptied subject moves beyond a personal, emotional attachment into the sphere of a justice which is impersonal and impartial, and yet which is still nothing other than love for the other in all her particularity. This love is an imitation of the divine love, and for Weil, we human beings must be the mediators of that divine love “here below,” as she would say, since God is wholly absent from this place. When this transpires, the decreated self becomes the relation in which justice—love—is instantiated. The one who attends and the one to whom attention is directed cease to become calcified subjects occupying a static position that seeks to place the self in the place of honor. Instead, by means of decreation and attention, justice—in the form of love—is mediated through the relational medium of the emptied self. This is Weil’s vision of the mystical-political, and as with all accounts of the mystical-political, we “cannot understand this divine operation of mediation, [we] can only love it. But in a perfectly clear manner [our] intelligence conceives a degraded
image of it, which is the relationship. There is never anything in human thought but relationships.


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