

SIMONE WEIL ON THE BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ

AN EXPLICATION OF THE WRITINGS ON THE BHAGAVAD  
GĪTĀ IN THE PUBLISHED WORKS OF SIMONE WEIL

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

Simone Weil's writings on the Bhagavad Gītā are, for the most part, scattered throughout her notebooks, posthumously published under the title Cahiers. The present study is an attempt to gather her references and notes on the Gītā and to present them as a coherent whole. It is an attempt to make clear from other of her writings what she meant in her references to this classic scripture of the Indian religious tradition and to see her interpretation of it in terms of the rest of her thought. It is not a critical analysis of her interpretation. The question of the validity of what she says about this text, and, indeed, of the Indian religious tradition as a whole, will be left to a further study.

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## PREFACE

Any attempt to deal in a scholarly fashion with Simone Weil's writings on the Gītā meets with at least two major difficulties. The first is the fragmentary nature of these writings. They are for the most part, concise and unelaborated jottings from her notebooks. The longest of them comprise only a few paragraphs; the shortest, only a passing reference. Simone Weil wrote neither books nor essays on any subject primarily concerned with the Indian tradition.

The second difficulty lies in the scope of the subject matter which forms the context of her references to the Gītā. Any one reference might lead into a discussion of such widely diverse topics as free-will, the just war, incarnation, yóga or the nature of time. This is to say nothing of her sweeping comparisons of Indian and Greek concepts, comparisons which are of staggering complexity in their ramifications.

In view of this situation it is necessary to make clear the nature and limits of the present study. The prime purpose of this work is not that of a critical analysis. Before a critical analysis can be attempted there is the preliminary task of investigating to see exactly what Simone Weil did say about the Gītā, and to clarify certain of her comments by reference to other of her writings.

I have called this study an "explication" of Simone Weil's thoughts on the Gītā. By this is meant an attempt to make explicit what is implicit in these comments, to make intelligible certain references and terms which are foreign to the Gītā but which comprise the main categories of Simone Weil's

thought. Its method has been, in a sense, to gather together her references to the Gītā and to construct a framework around them which makes their meaning more apparent. The intent of the work is one of clarification. Any critical comments made in the course of the main exposition, in footnotes or in the conclusion should be regarded as of secondary importance.

The main substance of the study is divided into three sections. The first is an exploration of Simone Weil's method which involves a discussion of her notion of contradiction. The second and third chapters are an examination of the two sides of the most important contradiction to be found in her writings on the Gītā--obedience to necessity and the transcending of necessity. The former is an examination of man as active; the latter an analysis of man as contemplative. The main body of the study is followed by a brief chapter containing conclusions which can be made at this time as well as suggestions for further study.

In the course of the paper, references to the Gītā have included both the original Sanskrit and an English translation. The Sanskrit is based on Professor Radhakrishnan's edition of the Gītā.<sup>1</sup> The translations are also those of Radhakrishnan unless otherwise indicated. I have used other translations only where I felt Radhakrishnan's translation did not bring out adequately those aspects of the passage which Simone Weil was concentrating upon.

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<sup>1</sup>S. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1948).



The translations of Simone Weil's writings are those of the standard English editions of her works as indicated in the bibliography. When the translation is my own I have indicated so.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance given to me by those who supervised the writing of this thesis, Dr. G. P. Grant, Dr. J. G. Arapura, and Dr. P. Younger. As thinkers and as men, I have nothing but the highest regard and admiration for them.

CHAPTER 1

## CHAPTER 1

### COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM

In an essay she once wrote on the Romanesque Renaissance, Simone Weil noted the distinct spiritual genius of the peoples of antiquity.

Every country of pre-Roman antiquity had its vocation, its revelation referring, not exclusively but mainly, to one aspect of supernatural truth. For Israel, it was the oneness of God, which became a fixed obsession. For Mesopotamia, it is no longer possible to say what it was. For Persia, it was the opposition and struggle between good and evil. For India, the identification, through mystic union, of God and the soul when it has reached the stage of perfection. For China, it was God's specific mode of operation, the divine non-action which is plenitude of action, the divine absence which is plenitude of presence. For Egypt, it was charity to one's neighbour, expressed with a never-surpassed purity; above all, it was the immortal bliss of saved souls after a just life, and salvation by assimilation to a God who had lived, suffered, died a violent death, and become, in the other world, the judge and savior of souls. Greece both received Egypt's message and had a revelation of her own: it was the revelation of human misery, of God's transcendence, of the infinite distance between God and man.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, Selected Essays (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 45.

Of these ancient people, there is no doubt but that it was Greek civilization to which Simone Weil's own thought was most indebted. The revelation of human misery she found most poignantly presented in the Iliad. The distance and transcendence of God she found most concisely expressed in a passage from Plato's Republic:

They call righteous and beautiful those things which are necessary, being incapable of seeing, or of showing others, to what degree the essence of the necessary differs from that of the good.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that when Simone Weil's idea of Greek spirituality is set beside her idea of Indian spirituality a tension arises in her thought. The notion of the "identification...of God and the soul" sits uneasily, at first appearance, beside a conviction of the "infinite distance between God and man." This apparent contradiction is not a contradiction between Indian civilization and Greek civilization nor even between Indian spirituality and Greek spirituality. It is rather a tension in the thought of Simone Weil which arises only when she holds that the central core of both of these traditions, as she has identified them are authentic and true.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Plato, The Republic, VI - 493c.

<sup>3</sup>It must be kept in mind when considering this interpretation of the Bhagavad Gītā that Simone Weil, toward the end of her life, was engaged in an attempt to understand what was true in the great religious traditions of the world. Although she was explicit in her disagreement with certain traditions, notably those coming out of Israel and Rome, she had a high degree of sympathy for the classical texts of the Greek, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese and Japanese religious traditions, among others, as well as for much of the world's folklore.

Before attempting to resolve this tension inherent in Simone Weil's thought about the Bhagavad Gītā it is necessary to understand what she says about the legitimate use of contradiction in intellectual and spiritual pursuit. Contradiction, she held, is a necessary part of spiritual and mental discipline because human existence is, at its basis, contradictory. She writes:

Contradiction is our path leading toward God because we are creatures, and because creation itself is a contradiction. It is contradictory that God, who is infinite, who is all, to whom nothing is lacking, should do something that is outside himself, that is not himself while at the same time proceeding from himself.<sup>4</sup>

The experience of contradiction in the intellectual sphere is paralleled by the experience of separateness and incompleteness in the region of the soul. Man feels himself torn apart, imperfect and alone. This is the essence of the human condition. In an essay on Plato's Symposium, Simone Weil comments on Aristophanes' discourse on man's androgynous ancestors:

But the essential idea is manifestly this. Our vocation is unity. Our affliction is to be in a state of duality.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this "state of duality" that man experiences the world as cruel, unjust and incomprehensible. Man only transcends this cruelty and injustice by returning to a state of unity. The transcending of the opposites,

<sup>4</sup>Simone Weil, The Notebooks (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 386.

<sup>5</sup>Simone Weil, Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 110.

the reconciliation of the contraries is the highest spiritual vocation of man.

The idea of the coincidence of the opposites was central both to Simone Weil's thinking and living. Insofar as her thought was concerned it led her to the idea of "attention". Insofar as living was concerned, it led her to the belief in the supernatural use of suffering.

The fact that contradiction is implicit in human existence imposes a "logic of contradiction" in intellectual and spiritual pursuits. If the human condition is contradictory then the highest calling for man is to contemplate and to experience to the depths of his being this contradiction:

The correlation of contraries that is representable to the mind is an image of the transcendental correlation of contradictories.

Correlation of contraries are like a ladder. Each of them raises us to a higher level wherein resides the connexion which unifies the contraries until we reach a spot where we have to think of the contraries together, but where we are denied access to the level at which they are linked together. This forms the last rung of the ladder. Once arrived there, we can climb no further; we have only to look up, wait and love. And God descends. (This is so both in the case of thought and of action, in the case of truth as in that of the good.)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Notebooks, p. 412.

Combined with the above method of contradiction we find in Simone Weil a rigorous rationality. The mind must pursue relentlessly each side of the contradiction as far as it can. Genuine contradiction must not be denied where it does exist. The mind must examine each side of the contradiction until the point at which human capacities fail and buckle under.

There is a legitimate and illegitimate use of contradiction and Simone Weil suggests that it is perhaps this distinction which might be the criterion by which true spirituality be assessed. In an essay on Marx she writes as follows:

The essential contradiction in human life is that man, with a straining after the good constituting his very being, is at the same time subject in his entire being, both in mind and in flesh, to a blind force, to a necessity completely indifferent to the good. So it is; and that is why no human thinking can escape from contradiction. Contradiction itself, far from always being a criterion of error, is sometimes a sign of truth. Plato knew this. But the cases can be distinguished. There is a legitimate and an illegitimate use of contradiction. The illegitimate use lies in coupling together incompatible thoughts as if they were compatible. The legitimate use lies, first of all, when two incompatible thoughts present themselves to the mind, in exhausting all the powers of the intellect in an attempt to eliminate at

least one of them. If this is impossible, if both must be accepted, the contradiction must then be recognized as a fact. It must then be used as a twolimbed tool, like a pair of incers, so that through it direct contact may be made with the transcendental sphere of truth beyond the range of the human faculties.<sup>7</sup>

For Simone Weil the most fundamental contradiction in the universe was that posed by the perfection of <sup>deity</sup> diety and the suffering of man. It is when the contraries of good and evil in the universe become particularized, the latter in the suffering and death of a child, for example, that a contradiction arises which stops the mind short. The point at which the contraries turn to contradictories is the "last rung of the ladder" of which Simone Weil spoke above (see p. 5). And this contradiction can only be resolved by the "descent" of God made possible by man's being torn by both sides of the contradiction. It was such a "descent" which allowed her to see in her own affliction the most complete revelation of divine goodness.

Combined with her belief in the "supernatural use" of suffering was her conviction of the divine absence from the universe. In her view of the universe Simone Weil speaks of the "creative renunciation of God". She writes:

God causes this universe to exist, but he consents not to command it, although he has the power to do so. Instead he leaves two forces to rule in his place. On the one

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<sup>7</sup>Simone Weil, Oppression and Liberty (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 173.



hand there is the blind necessity attaching to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul, and on the other the autonomy essential to thinking persons.<sup>8</sup>

At another point she refers to the creation as the "abdication" of God. "God can only be present in creation under the form of an absence". It is necessary, maintains Simone Weil to conceive of God as infinitely distant in order that the idea of God be at all consistent with our knowledge of human suffering.

Evil is the innocence of God. We have to place God at an infinite distance in order to conceive of him as innocent of evil, reciprocally, evil implies that we have to place God at an infinite distance.<sup>9</sup>

This led Simone Weil later to speak of the legitimate love of God as the love of he who was absent from and powerless in the world. Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's great novel enunciates a classic statement of man's rebellion against a God who permits the innocent suffering of children. Simone Weil's response to Ivan's argument is found in a short comment in her Notebooks:

To rebel against God because of man's affliction, after the manner of...Ivan Karamazov, is to represent God to oneself as a sovereign.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, Waiting on God (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> The Notebooks, p. 253.

<sup>10</sup> The Notebooks, p. 282.

The only satisfactory answer other than atheism to the innocent suffering of a child is to conceive of God as impotent in the world. It was this that Simone Weil saw as central to Christianity. The cross above all else, represented for her the divine impotence. In a short note in The Notebooks, she writes:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? There we have the real proof that Christianity is something divine.<sup>11</sup>

Man has the choice of worshipping a God who is all-powerful or a God who is good. If God has power in the world he cannot be excused for the suffering of children. He is therefore not good. If he is good it is because he is unable to intervene in creation. In a passage in which reference is made to the Gita, she writes:

God here below cannot be anything else but absolutely powerless. For all limited power is a union of power and powerlessness, but in accordance with a unity belonging to this world; whereas in God the union of these opposites is found in its highest degree. It is necessary that Kṛṣṇa should be separated from his army, that he should only take part in the battle as a charioteer, as a servant.<sup>12</sup>

If God is present in the world only in the form of an absence,<sup>13</sup> then it is necessary to understand the events of this world in terms other than that

<sup>11</sup>The Notebooks, p. 263.

<sup>12</sup>The Notebooks, p. 542.

<sup>13</sup>Simone Weil speaks in this paradoxical manner in a note in The Notebooks: "God can only be present in creation under the form of absence". (p. 419)

of intervention. Simone Weil saw the motion of the world and of men in the world in terms of the blind mechanism of necessity. What she admired most in the work of both Plato and Marx was their understanding of the <sup>extent</sup> extend to which human existence, both social and individual could be understood in terms of material and psychological "force". She writes of the latter:

Marx was the first, and, unless I am mistaken, the only one, for his researches were not followed up, to have the twin idea of taking society as the fundamental human fact and of studying therein, as the physicist does in matter, the relationships of force. Here we have an idea of genius, in the full sense of the word.<sup>14</sup>

In another passage she notes that in Plato a knowledge of the laws of social mechanics is compatible with and even necessary to the higher spirituality.

The idea of working out the mechanics of social relationships has been adumbrated by many lucid minds. It was doubtless this that inspired Machiavelli. 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 compares 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

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<sup>14</sup>Oppression and Liberty, p. 171.

same thought, but the same image; the beast in the Apocalypse is sister to the great beast in Plato. Working out a social mechanism 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. The essential idea in Plato - which is also that of Christianity, but has been very much neglected - is that man cannot escape being wholly enslaved to the beast, even down to the inner-most recesses of his soul; except insofar as he is freed by the supernatural operation of grace. Spiritual servitude consists in confusing the necessary with the good; for 'we do not know what a distance separates the essence of the necessary from that of the good'.<sup>15</sup>

The extent to which man is subject to necessity is found in two other passages. In a "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations", written shortly before her death, she wrote:

The reality of this world is necessity. The part of man which is in this world is the part which is in bondage to necessity and subject to the misery of need.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Oppression and Liberty, p. 165.

<sup>16</sup>Selected Essays, p. 221.

And in The Notebooks we find a recurring theme in her writing:

"All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity.<sup>17</sup> What she means by the "natural movements of the soul" is the soul insofar as it is subject to the mechanism of material or psychological force.<sup>18</sup>

In so far as Simone Weil insists that the world must be understood in terms of necessity she is exploring one side of the contradiction which we mentioned previously: that posed by the suffering of man and the perfection of God. At another level of reality, however, she insists that necessity must be understood ultimately as the will of God.

— In an essay on "The Love of God and Affliction" she writes:

A blind mechanism, heedless of degrees of spiritual perfection, continually tosses men about and throws some of them at the very foot of the Cross. It rests with them to keep or not to keep their eyes turned towards God through all the jolting. It does not mean that God's Providence is lacking. It is in his Providence that God has willed that necessity should be like a blind mechanism.<sup>19</sup>

In another passage in the same essay she continues to speak of the mechanisms

<sup>17</sup>The Notebooks, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup>It is important to remember in reading this section of the paper, no attempt is made to answer whether or not Simone Weil has interpreted Greek thought correctly. It is important for our purposes only to note how she interpreted it. It is highly probable that, as has been pointed out to me, her use of the term "natural" in passages such as the above is quite incompatible with the Greek notion of *φύσις*.

<sup>19</sup>Waiting on God, p. 69.

of necessity:

Seen from our present stand-point, and in human perspective, it is quite blind. If, however, we transport our hearts beyond ourselves, beyond the universe, beyond space and time to where our Father dwells, and if from there we behold this mechanism, it appears quite different. What seemed to be necessity becomes obedience. Matter is entirely passive and in consequence entirely obedient to God's will. It is a perfect model for us.<sup>20</sup>

It is not any event or events which are providential but the order of the world itself. The sea in its complete obedience to gravity and force is a model of the order of the world which man ought to contemplate.

Simone Weil sees the universe as the distance across which God loves himself. In order that the world may exist he must withdraw himself from it.

She writes:

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. Everything that we call evil is only this mechanism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Waiting on God, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> Waiting on God, p. 71.

The order of the world insofar as it is seen as the expression of the divine will must be contemplated and loved. The paradox comes full circle. Necessity which is recognized as blind and indifferent to the good is loved as that which is ultimately the most pure expression of God's goodness.

The absence of God is the most marvellous testimony of perfect love, and that is why pure necessity, necessity which is manifestly different from good, is so beautiful.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>The Notebooks, p. 403.

CHAPTER II



## CHAPTER II

### OBEDIENCE TO NECESSITY

Professor Surendranath Dasgupta, writing on the Gītā in his A History of Indian Philosophy entitled a short section of his work an "Analysis of Action". In this passage he wrote the following:

The Gita seem to hold that everywhere actions are always performed by the gunas or characteristic qualities of prakriti, the primal matter. It is through ignorance and false pride that one thinks himself to be the agent...The philosophy that underlies the ethical position of the Gita consists in the fact that, in reality, actions are made to happen through the movement of the characteristic qualities of prakriti...It is, therefore, sheer egoism to think that one can, at his own sweet will, undertake a work or cease from doing works...So Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna that the egoism through which you would not fight is mere false vanity, since the prakriti is bound to lead you to action. A man is bound by the active tendencies or actions which necessarily follow directly from his own nature and there is no escape.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps this "analysis of action" more than anything else which was the primary concern of Simone Weil in her reading of the Gītā. The passages

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<sup>1</sup>Surendranath Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy (Cambridge: University Press, 1932), pp. 515-516.

in which she mentions the Gītā are more frequently than not pursuing themes such as the relation between prakṛti and action, the nature of human choice, or the notion of action detached from its fruits. She repeatedly refers to the "problem" of Arjuna and like all readers of the Gītā attempts to understand the forces that necessitate his involvement in a fratricidal war. Her interest in the relation between thought and action, prevalent throughout her comments, is, moreover congruent with the concerns of the Gītā itself.<sup>2</sup>

Since Simone Weil considered necessity to be "the reality of this world," it is obvious that her discussion of man and his actions in this world involve in a central way the notion of "necessity". Necessity under one of its aspects is the cruel and indifferent force which drives the cold iron of affliction into the soul of man. But this does not account for all of human experience. Man also has the sensation at times of controlling to some extent both the ex-

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<sup>2</sup>Mircea Eliade, in his book on Yoga makes the following comment about the Gita:

The fundamental problem of the Bhagavad Gītā is to determine whether action too can lead to salvation, or if mystical meditation is the only means of attaining it - in other words, the conflict between "action" (Karma) and "contemplation" (Sama). Kṛṣṇa attempts to solve the dilemma (which had obsessed Indian spirituality from the beginnings of the post-Vedic period) by showing that the two methods, previously opposed, are equally valid..."

Although Eliade in this passage identifies "action" with "karma" and "contemplation" with Sama", it is clear that the Indian term "karma", for example, has meanings and connotations which are not included in its western equivalent. It ought to be pointed out that in most of her writings on the Gītā, Simone Weil was concerned primarily with the nature of "action" (fr. l'action) rather than with the nature of "karma".

The two concerns, action and contemplation, are the subjects, respectively, of this chapter and the next.

Mircea Eliade, Yoga: Immortality and Freedom (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 154-155.

ternal world and other men - in other words of being the master of necessity. At still other times his experience is somewhere between these two poles, man being neither in control of nor controlled by the world around him. It is in this connection that Simone Weil speaks of an "equilibrium" between man and necessity.

Necessity is an enemy for man as long as he thinks in the first person. To tell the truth, he has with necessity the three sorts of relationship he has with men. In fantasy, or by the exercise of social power, it seems to be his slave. In adversities, privations, grief, sufferings, but above all in affliction, it seems an absolute and brutal master. In methodical action there is a point of equilibrium where necessity, by its conditioned character, presents man at once with obstacles and with means in relation to the partial ends which he pursues and wherein there is a sort of equality between a man's will and universal necessity. This point of equilibrium is to the relationships of man with the world what natural justice is to the relationships between men. In the organization of work, of technology, of all human activity, one must try to achieve this point of equilibrium...<sup>3</sup>

Simone Weil then goes on to say:

The equilibrium between the human will and necessity in

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<sup>3</sup>Intimations, pp. 180-181.

methodical action is only an image, if one take it for a reality it is a lie. Notably what man takes for his ends are always simply his means. Fatigue forces him to find illusion. In the state of intense fatigue, man ceases to cling to his own actions and even to his own will: he sees himself as a thing which pushes others because it is pushed by a constraint. Effectually, the human will, although a certain sentiment of choice be attached to it, is simply a phenomenon among all those which are subject to necessity. The proof of this is that the will admits limits. The infinite alone is outside the empire of necessity.<sup>4</sup>

Although the equilibrium between man and what he experiences as his will and the order of necessity is "only an image" and not ultimately a "reality", it is necessary to discuss the image if one is to speak meaningfully of human action in the world. There is little doubt that in a large portion of her comments on the Gītā, Simone Weil is speaking at this level when she treats the ethical problem posed by Arjuna's actions.

Arjuna's agony is a search for the equilibrium between his own inner nature and the situation which confronts him in the world. According to Simone Weil, Arjuna's spiritual state at the time dictated that he must act:

Arjuna's mistake consists in wanting to raise himself in the sphere of outward manifestation. In this fashion one

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

can only degrade oneself and thicken the amount of evil both within and without at the same time. His action was in keeping with his spiritual level, since he had made up his mind to fight. It was not possible for him to do better, but only worse.<sup>5</sup>

For Simone Weil it is the state of being of the person who acts which is of decisive importance. It is what a man is which dictates what a man must do. She says in another statement, "Since Arjuna had decided upon war, it was only the feeling of pity which kept him from it. He was not worthy not to make war".<sup>6</sup>

Simone Weil extends the imagery of equilibrium by referring to action as the pointer of a pair of scales of which the two balances are man's inner nature and the exterior necessity which he must confront.

Arjuna wanted to rise in the scale of good through an act. (In his case it was non-resistance.) It is as though one were to seek to alter the balance of a pair of scales by shifting the pointer. If in a pair of scales with unequal weights you seize the pointer and hold it down at zero, all you do is to increase the disequilibrium.<sup>7</sup>

In another passage she uses the same image:

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<sup>5</sup>Notebooks, p. 294.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>7</sup>Notebooks, p. 418.

Arjuna is wrong, because he allows himself to be overcome by pity instead of fairly and squarely weighing up the problem: can I refrain from fighting? He has forgotten his pair of scales.<sup>8</sup>

The source which exerts the most influence over the equilibrium which is human action is that provided by the social order. Any action in society must take account of the forces which are at play. Since these forces are of the order of necessity, it is not a matter of doing good or evil but of keeping the evil to a minimum. In certain situations the forces which comprise society force one to do evil. It is in this connection that Simone Weil interprets "dharma". As an example, Simone Weil cites the example of Rama, forced by society to banish his wife around whom the suspicion of infidelity had unjustly arisen and of Rāma's execution of the śudra who by practicing "tapas" had violated caste duties.

In a given situation, every possible action contains a certain proportion of good and evil, or rather, since the proportion cannot be measured, a certain mixture. Dharma is a Law for choosing the mixture that is suitable for a man. Thus in the case of Rama, doing harm to his wife rather than to his people though well aware that his wife is in the right and the people in the wrong, because he is king. The same Law causes him to kill the shudra.

If he thinks it is wrong to kill the shudra, he must find out if it is possible to establish little by little

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

another sort of stable equilibrium in which a shudra is able to act thus without being punished. In the meantime, it is his duty to kill him.<sup>9</sup>

Both Rāma and Arjuna must assess correctly the equilibrium of social forces. In addition they owe an allegiance to the souls of those who make up the social order:

The first objections formulated by Kṛṣṇa.<sup>10</sup>

One should not perform an action, such that, in the given circumstances in which it is carried out, it is bound not to be understood by anybody. This is thickening the surrounding ignorance. The significance of an action, like the flavour of a poem should be perceived.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Notebooks, p. 49.

Both Rāma and Arjuna are less "free" in this respect than other men since they are rulers and are therefore personifications of the social order and not just members of it. For ordinary members of society Simone Weil offers a role in which a man is able to pursue a more independent course:

If we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale. Although the weight may consist of evil, in handling it with this intention, perhaps we do not become defiled. But we must have formed a conception of equilibrium and be ever ready to change sides like justice, that fugitive from the camp of conquerors. (The Notebooks, p. 96)

<sup>10</sup>See Gītā 3:26

na buddhibhedam janayed  
ajhānām karmasanginām

Let him not unsettle the minds of the ignorant who are attached to action.

<sup>11</sup>Notebooks, p. 101.

The only conditions under which Arjuna could refrain from fighting would be if his own presence were such that it transformed the situation in which he found himself. The distinguishing feature of the great man is that his own personality alters the equilibrium of the problem. It is in these terms that Simone Weil interprets non-violence. She writes:

Non-violence is only good if it is effective. Hence the questions put by the young man to Gandhi concerning his sister. The answer ought to be: use force, unless you happen to be such that you can defend her, with as much probability of success, without resorting to violence; unless you radiate an energy (that is to say, a potential efficacy in the strictly material sense) equal to that contained in your muscles...To strive to become such that one may be able to be non-violent.<sup>12</sup>

It is this which accounts for Arjuna's despondency. His shame lies not in what he is about to do but in what he is - or more correctly in what he is not. His failure, if one may call it that, lies in not being such that he could solve the situation in a non-violent way, without abdicating his responsibilities. In this respect, his problem at this moment is not to decide what to do but rather to realize what he is.

Arjuna's moment of pity - it belongs to the order of dreams. His display of weakness before proceeding to

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 96.



kill is comparable to the display of weakness at approaching death. At a given moment one is not free to do anything whatever. And one must accept this internal necessity: accept what one is, at a given moment, as a fact, even one's shame.<sup>13</sup>

What impels Arjuna to battle is neither the exterior conditions in which he finds himself nor the divine imperative of Kṛṣṇa that he must fight. It is rather an imperative from within Arjuna's own nature or as Simone Weil has put it, an "internal necessity". It is in this light that she speaks of one of the central themes of the Gītā:

Detachment from the fruits of action. To escape from inevitability of this kind. How? To act not for an object but from necessity. I cannot do otherwise. It is not an action but a sort of passivity. Inactive action.<sup>14</sup>

As an example of an action performed out of this inner necessity she cites the pure charity of Saint Nicholas who while rushing across the Russian Steppes to meet God "could not help being late for the appointed time of meeting

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>14</sup>The Notebooks, p. 124.

At another point she writes, "To do only that which one cannot do otherwise than do. Non-active action." (Notebooks, p. 96)

because he had to help a poor peasant to move his cart which had stuck in the mud." Simone Weil comments that "good which is done in this way, almost in spite of ourselves, almost shamefacedly and apologetically, is pure. All absolutely pure goodness completely eludes the will. Goodness is transcendent. God is Goodness."<sup>15</sup>

Both Nicholas's act of charity and Arjuna's act of fighting are necessitated by their own nature. For neither is it a matter of choice. Simone Weil notes that:

Kṛṣṇa hardly spends any time proving to Arjuna that he ought to fight, because before ever the talk between them takes place, there is no possible doubt at all that Arjuna will fight.<sup>16</sup>

In another passage she says of Arjuna:

He is torn between pity and the necessity for the battle. After seeing Vishnu in his true form (and he would not, it seems, have seen him if he had not been so torn), the latter kind of thought alone remains.<sup>17</sup>

The purpose of Kṛṣṇa's counsel to Arjuna is to ask him to accept the necessity imposed by his situation and his nature. Simone Weil sees at the

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<sup>15</sup>The Notebooks, p. 436.

<sup>16</sup>The Notebooks, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

heart of the Gītā the core of her own thought about man in this world. The highest calling for man, and for the representative man, Arjuna, is obedience to necessity. In one of the last comments she wrote on the Gītā she said:

The performing pure and simple of prescribed actions, no more nor less, that is to say obedience, is to the soul what immobility is to the body. This is the meaning of the Gītā.<sup>18</sup>

In an essay on "The Love of God and Affliction" Simone Weil wrote:

Man can never escape from obedience to God. A creature cannot but obey. The only choice given to man, as intelligent and free creatures, is to desire obedience or not to desire it.<sup>19</sup>

Behind this thought lies Simone Weil's view of the universe:

God has created, that is, not that he has produced something outside Himself, but that he has withdrawn Himself, permitting a part of being to be other than God. To this divine renunciation, the renunciation of creation responds, that is to say, obedience, responds. The whole universe is a compact mass of obedience. This compact mass is sprinkled with points of light. Each

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<sup>18</sup> Simone Weil., La Connaissance Surnaturelle (Paris: Gullimard, 1950), p. 306.

<sup>19</sup> Waiting on God, pp. 72-73.

one of these points is the supernatural part of the soul of a reasonable creature who loves God and who consents to obey. The rest of the soul is held in the compact mass. The beings gifted with reason who do not love God are only fragments of the compact and obscure mass. They also are wholly obedient but only in the manner of a falling stone. Their soul also is matter, psychic matter, humbled to a mechanism as rigorous as that of gravity. Even their own belief in their own free arbitration, the illusions of their pride, their defiance, their revolts are all simply phenomena as rigorously determined as the refraction of light. Considered thus, as inert matter, the worst criminals make up a part of the order of the world and therefore of the beauty of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Since necessity is the order under which God willed that the universe be, obedience to necessity is an ultimate obedience and paradoxically the only true freedom for man.

Necessity is the obedience of matter to God. Thus the pair of contraries constituted by necessity in matter, and liberty in us, has its meeting in obedience, for to be free, for us, is to desire to obey God.

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<sup>20</sup>Intimations of Christianity, p. 193.

All other liberty is false...<sup>21</sup>

Simone Weil interprets the Gītā's understanding of "dharma" in terms of obedience to necessity. She writes:

Obedience is the supreme virtue. To love necessity.

Necessity and dharma are but one and the same thing.

Dharma is necessity that is loved...<sup>22</sup>

Simone Weil has here taken the central concept of the entire Indian tradition and has interpreted it to correspond to the central notion of her own thought. To carry out one's dharma is to "consent to be subject to necessity and to act only by handling it."<sup>23</sup>

The idea of man's obedience to necessity including the necessity which

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 186-187.

<sup>22</sup>Notebooks, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup>Notebooks, p. 39.

Simone Weil does not enter into the debate, so acute in India, as to whether or not dharma ought to be understood primarily in terms of caste-duties. Dasgupta, for example, writes:

The word 'dharma' seems to be used in the Gītā primarily in the sense of an unalterable customary order of class-duties or caste-duties and the general approved course of conduct for the people and also in the sense of prescribed schemes of conduct. (op. cit., p. 486)

Simone Weil tends to minimize and ignore this dimension of the notion of dharma (see The Notebooks, p. 55). It ought to be pointed out, however, that part of what she understands by necessity is the social order, which those in positions of authority, in particular, must attempt to preserve (see footnote p. 23).

The way in which Simone Weil relates "dharma" to the "karma theory" is discussed in the next chapter.

is his own nature, however, raises questions as to the nature of the human personality. What is it in man that is the point of consent? What is it in man that acts? What is it in man that can separate itself from the psychic life and contemplate it as an object? It is necessary to digress for a moment to examine these questions.

The matter becomes of crucial importance when one's attention focuses on the following verse from the Gītā:

He who sees that all actions are done only by nature  
(prakṛti and likewise that the self (ātman) is not  
the doer, he verily sees.<sup>24</sup>

The distinction between ātman and prakṛti is fundamental to the Gītā.<sup>25</sup>

Simone Weil comments upon this distinction:

It is not the Ātman which acts, it is nature (prakṛti).  
Every action that has really taken place may be reduced  
to a play of necessary causes, without having any residue

<sup>24</sup> prakṛtyai 'va ca karmāni  
kriyamānāni sarvaśah  
yaḥ paśyati tathā 'tmānam  
akartāram sa paśyati (Gītā, 13:29)

<sup>25</sup> Monier Williams defines prakṛti as it is found in the Samkhya philosophy which underlies the Gītā in the following terms:

"the original producer of (or rather passive power of creating) the material world (consisting of three constituent essences or Gunas called sattva, rajas and tamas). Nature (distinguished from purusha (Spirit), as Maya is distinguished from Brahman in the Vedanta.

Edgerton translates prakṛti as "material nature" but notes that it includes "what with us are often called the 'mental faculties' of living beings, particularly man. The three gunas which comprise prakṛti: sattva, rajas and tamas re- three "modes of being" according to Eliade (Yoga: p. 19): "sattva (modality luminosity and intelligence); rajas (modality of motor energy and mental activity); tamas (modality of static inertia and psychic obscurity).

at all representing the share taken in it by the "I".<sup>26</sup>

At another point she makes clear that what acts in man is prakṛti:

Not to think that one kills - or that one saves, naturally. Not to think that one wields any power. Prakṛti with its gunas does everything - even good - even evil - both good and evil, everything.<sup>27</sup>

In the Gītā, prakṛ and the three gunas which comprise it describe both the external world which surrounds man and the psychic life which is his subjectivity. Tamas, for example, describes "static inertia" in the external world while also describing "psychic obscurity" in the subjective world. This insight in the Gita corresponds to Simone Weil's conviction that nature and man are both subject to similar mechanisms. Human behavior, she believed, could be understood in terms of laws analogous to those which describe the phenomena of the physical sciences.<sup>28</sup> The terminology of physics - terms such as "gravity", "vacuum", and "equilibrium" recur throughout her writing on human behavior.

It is necessary to keep this in mind to grasp her interpretation of the three gunas which comprise prakṛti:

<sup>26</sup>The Notebooks, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup>The Notebooks, p. 97.

<sup>28</sup>She once wrote in her notebooks:

There exists the need to try and formulate in psychology principles analogous to the conservation of energy and entropy. In sociology also. It is in this sense that they can become sciences. (The Notebooks, p. 88)

Tamas is at the same time aberration - chance, fragmentation of portions of time, lack of foresight, non-adaptation of means to ends - and fatigue, passivity. Necessarily the province of the sudras. Matter is non-foresight and passivity. The sudra imitates matter by which he is oppressed. Rajas is that supplementary force possessed by man and which is concentrated in the highest degree among the Ksatriyas. (Kinship between love and war.) It is energy. Sattva is something in nature which enables the supernatural, in a certain sense to exist. But it is something inside nature. (Sentimus experimurque not aeternos esse, and the 'feeling of immortality', the primordial state.)<sup>29</sup>

The identification of "tamas" with "matter" is clarified somewhat in a passage from a "Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations". She writes:

All human beings are absolutely identical in so far as they can be thought of as consisting of a centre, which is an unquenchable desire for the good surrounded by accretion of psychical and bodily matter.<sup>30</sup>

If man is a centre surrounded by an "accretion of psychical and bodily matter" it is "energy" (rajas) which accounts for motion in man. The use of the

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<sup>29</sup>The Notebooks, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup>Selected Essays, p. 220.



term "energy" to describe the motive power of moral effort occurs at numerous places in Simone Weil's writings. In The Notebooks she writes:

The object of an action and the level of energy by which it is carried out are distinct from each other. A certain thing must be done. But where is the energy to be drawn for its accomplishment? A virtuous action can lower if there is not enough energy available on the same level.<sup>31</sup>

In a passage in The Notebooks Simone Weil answers her own question as to the origin of energy. She writes:

Objects surely do not give any energy; they concentrate what there is always in us...of non-directed, dispersed vital energy.<sup>32</sup>

Simone Weil then goes on to make reference to Arjuna:

A lot of energy concentrated, all of a sudden liberated: violent disequilibrium. Or if the object of the energy became an object of repulsion. Arjuna. (How does the sudden collapse occur? Energy turned against the body in a more inward fashion than in the case of someone who smites his chest.)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>The Notebooks, p. 369.

<sup>32</sup>The Notebooks, p. 203. (This matter will be discussed more fully in the next chapter's analysis of "attention".

<sup>33</sup>The Notebooks, p. 203.

Of Simone Weil's interpretation of the three gunas, tamas, rajas, and sattva, it is the latter, however, which is most enigmatic. She speaks of sattva as "something in nature which enables the supernatural...to exist." At the same time it is completely "natural".

Sattva, as has been noted, is associated with luminosity in Indian thought.<sup>34</sup> By the same token, Simone Weil describes the relationship between the natural and the supernatural using the analogy of light. She writes in The Notebooks:

The Object of my search is not the supernatural but this world. The supernatural is the light. We must not presume to make an object of it, or else we degrade it.<sup>35</sup>

The supernatural is related to the natural either as being transparent (in the sense that it is not discernable with the natural faculties) or as an infinitely small point within nature. In Oppression and Liberty Simone Weil describes the decisive importance of the infinitely small point:

Nature, which is a mirror of divine truths, offers everywhere an image of this paradox. Catalyst, bacteria are examples of it. Compared with a solid body, a point is something infinitely small. Yet, in each body, there is one point which predominates

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<sup>34</sup>See footnote, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup>The Notebooks, p. .

over the entire mass; for if the point is supported the body does not fall; that point is the centre of gravity.

But a point thus supported only prevents a mass from falling if the mass is disposed asymmetrically around it or if the asymmetry in it has certain proportions.

Yeast only makes the dough rise if it is mixed with it.

The catalyst only acts when in contact with the reactive elements. In the same way there exist certain material conditions for the supernatural operation of the divine that is present on earth in the form of something infinitely small.<sup>36</sup>

This infinitely small point, Simone Weil admits, is the point of paradox. In a very real sense, it is the point of contradiction of which we spoke earlier. The point which is the centre of gravity, if supported, defies gravity. But, in a broader sense, this point at which the natural meets the supernatural is also the point at which the complete and utter obedience to necessity leads to the transcending of necessity. We have led up to this point from one side of the contradiction examining the way in which man is subservient to the order of necessity. It remains now to examine the other side of the contradiction.

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<sup>36</sup>Oppression and Liberty, p. 166.

CHAPTER III

## CHAPTER III

### THE TRANSCENDING OF NECESSITY

The concept of "obedience" which was examined in the last chapter is one of two central ideas in Simone Weil's interpretation of the Gītā. The other notion balancing that of "obedience" and of equal importance to it, is the notion of "attention". In an essay on the "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" Simone Weil makes the following observation on man's spiritual quest:

The effort which brings a soul to salvation is like the effort of looking or of listening; it is the kind of effort by which a fiancée accepts her lover. It is an act of attention and consent; whereas what language designates as will is something suggestive of muscular effort.<sup>1</sup>

The discipline of "attention" Simone Weil saw as essential to all genuine intellectual and spiritual endeavour. In intellectual pursuits, it is a method for piercing through to the truth to which statements point. In man's spiritual life, "attention" is the means by which man prepares himself to receive the divine grace.

Simone Weil cites as an example of the intellectual use of attention the following:

A geometrical or arithmetic problem requires to be

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Waiting on God, p. 125.

solved; all that is necessary is to fix our attention upon it. A Latin, Greek or Sanskrit text requires to be translated; all that is necessary is to fix our attention upon it.<sup>2</sup>

The operation of attention is essentially impersonal.<sup>3</sup> If attention is focused on a problem, the problem, in a sense, solves itself. Truth, if the conditions are met in the mind of the recipient reveals itself in a pure and necessary manner. Simone Weil makes it clear that the realm of truth and grace has its own necessity. She writes:

We have to be indifferent both to good and evil; but whilst remaining indifferent, that is to say, whilst bringing the light of the attention to bear equally on the one and on the other, good prevails as a result of an automatic mechanism. This represents the essential form of grace. But it is also the definition, the criterion of good.

A divine inspiration operates infallibly, irresistibly, if one does not turn the attention away from it, if one does not reject it. There is no need to make a

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The Notebooks, p. 301.

<sup>3</sup>In her essay on "Human Personality" Simone Weil notes:

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...(Selected Essays, p. 14)

choice in its favour; all that is necessary is not to refuse to recognize its existence.<sup>4</sup>

This consent to "recognize" the existence of the good and the "divine inspiration" which stems from it, means that attention presupposes faith. By the same token, attention is the necessary condition of charity. Simone Weil makes this connection in the following comment in The Notebooks:

The poet produces beauty by fixing his attention on something real. The act of love is produced in the same way. To know that this man, who is cold and hungry, really exists as much as I do myself, and is really cold and hungry - that is enough, the rest follows of itself.

The pure and authentic values - truth, beauty and goodness - in a human being's activity are the result of one single and self-same act, a certain application of the attention at its fullest to the object.<sup>5</sup>

It is in connection with this last assertion that "truth, beauty and goodness" in human activity result from a certain state of attention, that many of Simone Weil's comments on the Gītā become intelligible. In The Notebooks she makes the following reference to Arjuna:

Arjuna's mistake consists in wanting to raise himself in the sphere of outward manifestation. In this fashion

<sup>4</sup>The Notebooks, p. 303.

<sup>5</sup>The Notebooks, p. 449.

one can only degrade oneself and thicken the amount of evil both within and without at the same time. His action in fighting was in keeping with his spiritual level, since he had made up his mind to fight. It was not possible for him to do better, but only worse. All that he could do was, while remaining through and beyond his action in a state of contemplation, doubting its validity, standing outside it and straining towards the better and non-represented, to prepare himself to become later on capable of doing better. That is what his dharma signifies.

Action is the pointer of the balance. One must not touch the pointer, but the weights.<sup>6</sup>

Arjuna's mistake is to seek his salvation in action alone, rather than in a state of attention which accompanies action. It is clear that Simone Weil considers Arjuna's spiritual posture of more importance than the actions he is to perform. It is thought, not action, which is decisive in man's spiritual quest. The negative side of this central notion in Simone Weil's interpretation of the Gītā is expressed succinctly in the following entry in The Notebooks:

Not to seek Good in action. That is what the Gītā teaches us.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The Notebooks, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup>The Notebooks, p. 289.



In another passage, Simone Weil elaborates upon this theme:

At the heart of the question concerning the merit attaching to works lies the following truth - which Arjuna failed to recognize, namely, that we do not rise through our acts but solely through our contemplation of God. We can only descend through our acts, omitting to perform our duty being an act among others. If we perform the whole of our duty in the sphere of action, all we do is simply to manage to remain at our own particular level. Acts constitute the pointer of the balance. If we move the pointer, we distort the balance. 'I was naked, and ye clothed me'. The gift of clothing is merely the sign indicating the state in which those who acted in that fashion found themselves.<sup>8</sup>

The superiority of contemplation over action is not only its implicit value in being the only link between man and that reality which lies beyond the world. Its superiority lies also in the fact that it is thought, ironically, which is truly decisive in the realm of action. Simone Weil describes dominance of thought over action in the following note:

The true difficulty, not to do what is good when one has seen it, but to see it with such intensity that

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<sup>8</sup>The Notebooks, p. 486.

the thought passes automatically into action; as when one reads a piece of music, and the notes which enter through the eyes come out in the form of sound at the tips of one's fingers - as one sees a Rugby football and there it is in one's arms.<sup>9</sup>

The man whose actions result automatically from an application of attention is free from the sensation of choice. The experience of decision at a point in time Simone Weil saw as essentially illusory and as resulting from a lack of self-awareness. Simone Weil sees Arjuna, in the opening chapter of the Gītā, as being under this illusion. In the concluding section of a passage which was quoted only in part in a previous chapter this is made clear.

Kṛṣṇa hardly spends any time proving to Arjuna that he ought to fight, because before even the talk between them takes place, there is no possible doubt at all that Arjuna will fight. Inward deliberation of which there are many examples. The moment of choice for Arjuna has gone by. Which is the moment of choice?

Nearly always, the moment of deliberation does not coincide with the moment of choice. We deliberate when we have already made our choice or perhaps, more rarely, when we are not yet in a position to

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<sup>9</sup>The Notebooks, p. 56.

make a choice.<sup>10</sup>

Implicit in Simone Weil's position on this matter is the awareness that human choice is a process involving the dimension of time. The application of the attention through the passage of time is the decisive aspect of human existence - Simone Weil interprets the notion of reincarnation in the Gītā as a symbolic expression of this truth. She writes:

Gītā. Note that dharma, since it depends on caste, therefore on birth, therefore on previous incarnation, depends on an antecedent choice. It is not that one has not the choice, but that, if one situates oneself at a given moment in time, one no longer has the choice, it is useless to dream of doing something else, but it is a good thing to rise about what one is doing at the time. By that means one chooses, for later on, something better.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The Notebooks, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup>The Notebooks, p. 56.

It is this application of attention through time which allows one to distinguish between illusion and reality: Simone Weil writes:

A method is necessary for the understanding of images, symbols etc. One should not try to interpret them, but contemplate them until their significance flashes upon one...

The application of this method for discriminating between what is real and what is illusory. In the case of sensible perception, if one is not sure about what one sees, one shifts one's position while going on looking (for example, one goes round the object) and the real appears. In the life of the spirit, time takes the place of space. Time brings modifications in us, and if through-out these modifications we keep our gaze directed onto a certain thing, finally what is illusory is dissipated and what is real appears; always provided that our attention consist of a contemplative look and not one of attachment. (The Notebooks, p. 334)

"To rise above what one is doing" at a given time, Simone Weil sees as a matter of attention. In the Gītā it is seen in terms of "detachment" from the fruits of action.<sup>12</sup> Simone Weil makes the connection between her categories and those of the Gītā when she notes that "attachment manufactures illusions, and anyone who wants to behold the real must be detached".<sup>13</sup>

In this matter it is necessary to see the work of attention in negative terms. Through the application of attention one is able to dispel illusions and to suspend in oneself the activity of auto-suggestion and imagination. It is also the means of eliminating in oneself a false perspective on the world. Indeed, Simone Weil describes one of the most important functions of attention as that of the creation of a void. The void is created, at one level of consciousness, by eliminating concern for the "fruits of action".

The necessity for a reward, the need to receive the equivalent of what we give. But if, doing violence to this necessity, we leave a vacuum, as it were a suction of air is produced and a supernatural reward results. It does not come if we receive other wages: it is this vacuum which makes it come.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action by thy motive, neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.

karmaṇy evā 'dhikāras te  
mā phaleṣu kadācana  
mā karmaphalahetur bhūr  
mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi (Gita, 2:47)

<sup>13</sup>The Notebooks, p. 334.

<sup>14</sup>The Notebooks, p. 135.

This "vacuum" is the "void" of which Simone Weil speaks in the following note on the Gītā:

Gītā. Renunciation of action does not produce a void.

Renunciation, not of action, but of the fruits of action

- here there is a void.

Continually to suspend in oneself the work of imagination,

filler up of voids and restorer of balances.<sup>15</sup>

The renunciation of the fruits of action Simone Weil sees as freeing oneself from a false perspective which places the "I" at the centre of the universe. This act of renunciation is "to empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centres and that the true centre is outside the world".<sup>16</sup>

At the same time that one gives up the illusion of being the centre of the universe and sees oneself as an infinitely small point in the universe, at that moment, it becomes possible to identify oneself with the totality of the universe. To accept the void is to love the universe and, in a sense, to become the universe. Simone Weil speaks of this form of attention in a passage which it is necessary to quote at some length. She writes.

The Ātman - let the soul of a man take the whole universe for its body. Let its relation to the whole universe be like that of the collector to his collection,

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<sup>15</sup>The Notebooks, p. 145.

<sup>16</sup>Waiting on God, p. 99.

or that of one of the soldiers who died crying out "Long live the Emperor" to Napoleon. The soul transports itself outside the body into something else. Let it therefore transport itself into the whole universe...One should identify oneself with the universe itself. Everything that is less than the universe is subjected to suffering (being partial and consequently exposed to outside forces).

Even though I die, the universe continues. That does not console me if I am anything other than the universe. If, however, the universe is, as it were, another body to my soul, my death ceases to have any more importance for me than that of a stranger. The same is true of my sufferings.<sup>17</sup>

This identification of the soul with the universe is not the same, however, as the Ātman-Brahman identification of the Upanishads. Simone Weil goes on in this passage to say:

Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body, what the stick of a blind man is in relation to his hand. His sensibility really no longer resides in his hand, but at the end of the stick.<sup>18</sup>

The essential point about the blind man's stick is that it mediates

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<sup>17</sup>The Notebooks, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup>The Notebooks, p. 19.

between the man who holds it and reality which he perceives through it. By the same token the whole universe mediates between man and God. To take on the entire universe as one's body is to use the universe as mediation (metaxu).<sup>19</sup> It is at this point that one sees clearly the implication for her interpretation of Indian thought of Simone Weil's belief in the infinite distance and transcendence of God. To accept the entire universe as mediation is, in a sense, to be at the furthest distance from God. It is at the same time, however, to be in the purest relation to Him.

Simone Weil notes that "harmony is defined by the Pythagoreans as the unity of contraries".<sup>20</sup> Man and God are in perfect harmony when they are at opposite ends of the universe. Man achieves his perfection as creature when the full weight of creation weighs upon him and separates him from God. Experiencing creation in its separateness from the Good and in its basic contradiction is a central aspect of Arjuna's dilemma. It is this which is hinted at in a short but important note on Arjuna in The Notebooks.

He is torn between pity and the necessity for the battle.

After seeing Vishnu in his true form (and he would not, it seems, have seen him if he had not been so torn), the latter kind of thought alone remains.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>The essence of created things is to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to the other and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading to God. We have to experience them as such (The Notebooks, p. 496).

<sup>20</sup>Intimations, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup>The Notebooks, p. 55.

The important words in this passage are those which Simone Weil bracketed. The fact that Arjuna's being torn was a necessary condition of the revelation of Vis<sup>nu</sup> is related to what Simone Weil refers to elsewhere as the experiencing of the "contradictions" inherent in created existence. Arjuna is "torn" in his growing realization of the necessity to slay his brothers and teachers. The necessity forced upon him involves more than the sacrifice of his own life. It is essentially a sacrifice of all meaning in his own existence.

Arjuna experiences the contradiction of created existence because he is aware both of the necessity to wage war and the fact that the war is to be waged against those he loves. As Simone Weil notes, the transcending of contradiction is possible only if one experiences or contemplates both sides of the contradiction at the same time. She writes:

Either the mind maintains real within itself the simultaneous notion of the contradictories, or else it is tossed about by the mechanism of natural compensations from one of the contraries to the other. That is what the Gita means by "having passed beyond the aberration produced by the contraries".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>The Notebooks, p. 387. Simone Weil is undoubtedly referring here to verse 7:28 which Swami Swarupananda translates as follows:

Those men of virtuous deeds, whose sin has come to an end—they, freed from the delusion of the pairs of opposites, worship me with firm resolve.

yesām tv antagatām pāpam  
janānām puṇyakarmaṇām  
te dvandvānirmuktā  
bhajante mām dr̥dhavratāḥ

The question of whether Simone Weil has interpreted this passage and in particular whether she has understood the term 'dvandva' correctly is an extremely important but necessarily complex problem. It involves ultimately the question of how the principle of contradiction has been understood in the Indian tradition.



It is the effort of attention which allows the mind to hold within itself the two sides of the contradiction at the same time. Without the effort of attention the mind alternates, grasping one side and then the other and remains in a state of confusion. In this condition man can never rise to the Good. Simone Weil writes:

A Pythagorean idea: good is always defined by the union of the opposites. When one extols the opposite of a certain evil, one remains at the level of that evil. Having experienced this opposite, one goes back again to evil. It is what the Gītā calls being led astray by the aberration of contraries.<sup>23</sup>

The values of contradiction for human existence is that it is the "path leading toward God". Simone Weil refers to "the simultaneous existence of contrary virtues in the soul" and "the simultaneous conception of contradic-

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If Indian thought can be characterized, for example, as being based on a principle of negation and Greek thought on the principle of contradiction, then this would have important ramifications for Simone Weil's interpretation of certain aspects of the Bhagavad Gītā. This matter, however, is too complex for simple generalizations of this nature. It may be that the matter of contradiction depends ultimately upon the perspective from which it is viewed. From the point of view of creature qua creature it is close to ultimate. It is real. From the point of view of creator, insofar as man can attempt to formulate that perspective, contradiction is ultimately negated. In spite of the importance Simone Weil places on this principle it must be remembered that for her the contradictions involved in created existence are, in the final analysis, mediated. The present study is concerned only to outline how Simone Weil interpreted such passages, not to pass judgment on the interpretation. A further study will go into this matter in depth and hopefully come to some conclusions on the matter of the validity of this interpretation.

<sup>23</sup>The Notebooks, p. 447.

tory truths" as "pincers for reaching up to God".<sup>24</sup>

The contemplation of the contradictions of this world leads the mind eventually to contemplate "the reality outside the world". Simone Weil makes it clear that attention at this point become synonymous with supernatural love and prayer.<sup>25</sup> Insofar as the Gītā is concerned, the object of attention at this level is Kṛṣṇa. As Kṛṣṇa says:

But those, who laying their actions on me, intent on me,  
worship, meditating on me, with unswerving devotion.

These whose thoughts are set on me, I straightway  
deliver from the ocean of death-bound existence, O  
Partha (Arjuna).<sup>26</sup>

Simone Weil makes reference to this aspect of the Gītā's teaching in a note concerned with Arjuna's situation. She writes that:

"It (the Gītā) teaches that even in such a situation,  
there is where your salvation lies, if, whilst you are  
acting, you cast the action beneath you, and if you

<sup>24</sup>The Notebooks, p. 394.

<sup>25</sup>"Supernatural love and prayer are nothing else but the highest form of attention". (The Notebooks, p. 311)

<sup>26</sup>ye tu sarvāṇi karmāṇi  
maji saṁyasya matparāḥ  
ananyenai 'va yogena  
mām dhyāyanta upāsate

teṣām ahaṁ samuddhartā  
mṛtyusaṁsārasāgarāt  
bhavāmi nacirāt pārtha  
mayy āveśitocetasām

(Gītā, 12:6, 7)

love Kṛṣṇa.<sup>27</sup>

It is through the love of Kṛṣṇa that one rises, or, more correctly, that God descends. In a passage in which she speaks of the "descending movement" of God, Simone Weil writes:

When we pray, we must not have any particular thing in view, unless we have been supernaturally inspired in this respect. For God is a universal being. Certainly he descends into the particular. He has descended, he descends in the act of creation...as he also does in the case of the Incarnation, the Eucharist, inspiration, etc. But it is a descending movement. The link established between the universal and the particular is a descending movement, never an ascending one; a movement on God's part not on ours. We are unable to effect such a link except in so far as it is dictated to us by God. Our role is to be turned toward the universal.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>The Notebooks, p. 54. While Simone Weil's own personal spirituality took a more "Christian" form, it is clear that she felt that Kṛṣṇa and Christ were different manifestations of the same reality. Meditation on Kṛṣṇa for an Indian is as efficacious as meditation on Christ for a European. In A Letter to a Priest, in which she defined her position in relation to Roman Catholicism, Simone Weil wrote:

Every time that a man has, with a pure heart, called upon Osiris, Dionysus, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, the Tao, etc; the Son of God has answered him by sending the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit has acted upon his soul, not by inciting him to abandon his religious tradition, but by bestowing upon him light - and in the best of cases the fullness of light in the heart of that same religious tradition. (Letter to a Priest, p. 29)

<sup>28</sup>The Notebooks, p. 307. This descending movement, as we have seen in the case of creation is of a sacrificial nature. One of the ideas which intrigued Simone Weil was the relation between incarnation and sacrifice. In both Christ and Kṛṣṇa the two are combined. In a passage in Waiting on God in which she maintains that Noah had received a revelation after offering up a sacrifice Simone

The awareness that the bond between man and God is established through a "descending movement", a "movement on God's part not on ours" means that man's posture is one of obedience not one of assertion. At the same time, "to be turned toward the universal" is to be in a state of attentive waiting. It is at this point in the contemplation of the divine that "obedience" and "attention" become one. It is at this point at which man becomes a being perfectly unified in consent and attention. And it is at this point, Simone Weil believes that God descends.

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Weil writes:

"Christians think of the mass as a sacrifice in which the Passion is repeated day by day. The Bhagavad-Gītā, which is prior to the Christian era, also makes the incarnate God say "Sacrifice is myself, present in this body". So the association of the ideas of sacrifice and incarnation probably dates from very ancient times. (Waiting on God, p. 167, 168)

This is a reference to Gītā 8:4, which Juan Mascaro translates as follows: Matter is the kingdom of the earth, which in time passes away; but the Spirit is the kingdom of Light. In this body I offer sacrifice, and my body is a sacrifice.

adhibhūtaṁ kṣaro bhāvaḥ  
 puruṣaś cā 'dhidaivatam  
 adhiyajña 'haṁ evā 'tra  
 dehe dehabhṛtām vara

## CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The purpose of this study, as outlined in the Preface, is one of "explication" rather than one of critical assessment. The author's aim has been to make more intelligible the writings of Simone Weil on the Bhagavad Gītā rather than to examine their validity, a task of considerably greater complexity. This being the case, to include in the study a chapter of "conclusions" may seem superfluous and out of place. Once one has clarified the works of an author, surely the aim of the project has been completed in the clarification.

There is considerable truth in this objection and it is for this reason that the attempt to draw conclusions at this point has been kept to a minimum. There is, however, cause for making a few observations on the nature of Simone Weil's interpretation of the Gītā if for no other reason than the fact that these observations will make clearer the lines that future research ought to follow.

In the first chapter of this study, I indicated that Simone Weil's own intellectual and spiritual life owed more to her reading of Greek and Christian writings than it did to any of the Indian classics. While noting this, it is important at the same time not to minimize the importance of the Gītā to her thought. There is some reason for believing that, although the Gītā was not central to Simone Weil's thinking, it was not, on the other hand, what one would call "peripheral". The Gītā seems to have intervened at decisive points in Simone Weil's life. She writes in an autobiographical letter to Father Perrin:

In the spring of 1940 I read the Bhagavad Gītā. Strange to say it was in reading those marvellous words, words with such a Christian sound, put into the mouth of an incarnation of God, that I came to feel strongly that we owe an allegiance to religious truth which is quite different from the admiration we accord to a beautiful poem, it is something far more categorical.<sup>1</sup>

In another letter to her parents two months before her death she writes:

I have started doing a few lines of Sanskrit again every day, in the Gītā. How it does one good, the language of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from these statements that the Gītā was a sacred writing which Simone Weil treasured dearly. It is equally clear, however, that her serious study of the Gītā took place only in the last three and a half years of her life. It is obvious that at this point in her life her main categories of thought were more or less clearly defined and that she must have brought to the Gītā a multitude of pre-conceived opinions on the matters which are discussed in the Gītā.

That this is true seems to me to be beyond question. It is testified to by the impossibility, experienced in the writing, of organizing a discussion

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<sup>1</sup>Waiting on God, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Selected Essays, p. 188.

on Simone Weil's comments in terms of the Gītā's categories rather than her own. The hopelessness of arranging a study such as this one under categories such as "karma", "dharma", "bhakti" and "jnana" must be clearly apparent to anyone who contemplates it for a short time. The necessity for numerous and lengthy digressions make the difficulties insurmountable. The necessity of organizing this study along the main lines of Simone Weil's own thought is a strong indication that Simone Weil imposed her own structure on the Gītā.<sup>3</sup>

This tendency to read the Gītā looking for confirmation of certain notions is revealed even more clearly in the following rather whimsical remark in The Notebooks:

If Kṛṣṇa himself were troubled in spirit, as Christ was in the Gospel, wouldn't it be far more beautiful?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>This is not to say, however, that this structure is erroneous or untrue to the Gītā. As I have indicated, that is a question of great complexity and an answer to it is not attempted in the present study.

It is worth noting in this context, however, the criterion Simone Weil sets down for approaching religious traditions other than one's own:

Each religion is alone true, that is to say, that at the moment we are thinking on it we must bring as much attention to bear on it as if there were nothing else; in the same way, each landscape, each picture, each poem etc., is alone beautiful. A "synthesis" of religions implies a lower quality of attention. (The Notebooks, p. 228)

<sup>4</sup>The Notebooks, p. 286. In examining comments such as this it is important to remind oneself again as to the nature of the writings of The Notebooks. As I noted in the Preface, they are random jottings of ideas that came into Simone Weil's head at various times. They were never meant to be published in their present form and it would be erroneous to hold Simone Weil to account for them in the way that one would over her more formal writings. Comments such as this, however, made at more unguarded moments, reveal something of the attitude with which she approached the Gītā. It would be as arbitrary to ignore such comments as to overemphasize them.



It is more than evident that at this point Simone Weil is attempting to impose an alien system of ideas on the Gītā rather than waiting upon the message of the Gītā in a spirit of impersonal attention.

Another indication of this tendency is the identification in Simone Weil's own mind of "prakṛti with "necessity". The distinction between prakṛti and ātman in the Gītā, Simone Weil interpreted in terms of the distinction between the necessary and the good which she saw in Greek thought. This can be seen by comparing the following two statements taken from consecutive paragraphs of The Notebooks:

Gītā and the Legend of Joan of Arc. To fight the English was Joan of Arc's dharma, although a woman and a shepherdess (if we do not take the caste system in a strictly social sense), but it was Nature which infused her actions (prakṛti not God (Ātman)). (Gītā 13:29)

Compare the above statement with a passage from the paragraph immediately following it.

A harmful action which I cannot avoid accomplishing, except by accomplishing another even greater one - it is not I who accomplish it, it is necessity.<sup>5</sup>

In both cases action is seen in terms of necessity (or prakṛti It is hardly necessary to ask whether she had the Greek term in mind when she approached the

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<sup>5</sup>The Notebooks, p. 55.

Indian word or the Indian term in mind when she approached the Greek. It is obvious that the Greek category was basic to her thought and that she approached the Sanskrit word in terms of it.

To know this, however, is not to know whether or not what Simone Weil says about prakṛti is correct. To indicate the origin of certain ideas is not to pass judgment upon their truth or falsehood. It will remain for a further study to attempt to see if prakṛti and, indeed, the whole of the Gītā, can be interpreted legitimately in the way in which Simone Weil has done so.

Indeed, further studies into the comparison of categories of different traditions would be necessary to assess such complex statements as the following taken from The Notebooks.

Either the mind maintains within itself the simultaneous notion of contradictories, or else it is tossed about by the mechanism of natural compensations from one of the contraries to the other. That is what the Gītā means by "having passed beyond the aberration produced by the contraries". It forms the very basis of the notion of dharma, which is also clearly apparent in the splendid definition of Anaximander. It forms the basis of the notion of Nemesis, and represents the transposition of the latter in the realm of psychology. It is essentially a Pythagorean conception. It is a truth of the very highest importance for the conduct of life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The Notebooks, p. 387.

To analyze and appraise the validity of such a statement would be a project of considerable scope and intricacy which ought to be pursued.

Another problem, centered around Simone Weil's concern with the Gītā is of a more personal nature. Simone Weil indicated that she commenced serious study of the Gītā in the spring of 1940. Jacques Cabaud, her most thorough biographer, dates it as late 1939.<sup>7</sup> The relation of her reading of the Gītā to the outbreak of the war and her disillusionment with pacifism would be a necessary consideration in a total assessment of her writings on the Gītā.

A discussion of this matter was not included in this paper because it was not necessary to the accomplishment of its purpose. Secondly, to say anything authoritative on the subject, it would be necessary to have access to original manuscripts in order to date precisely when entries were made in The Notebooks, and to know what other influences, in the form of books, discussions and events, were being exerted at the same time. Certainly the setting of the Gītā was a very poignant one for anyone living in France in late 1939 and early 1940.

The possibilities for further study of Simone Weil's writings on the Gītā are considerable. It is to be hoped that the present study has accomplished the purpose set out in the Preface and that ground has been covered in this subject which will not need to be retraced. It is to be hoped also that this paper has initiated research into an area which is rich and promising for those who attempt to bridge the gap in understanding between the religions of the east and the religions of the west.

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<sup>7</sup>Jaques Cabaud, Simone Weil, A Fellowship in Love (London: Harvill Press, 1964), p. 192.

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