THE NON-TOTALIZING GAZE OF FAITH

THE NON-TOTALIZING GAZE OF FAITH:

TOWARDS A RELIGIOUS ETHIC OF ATTENTION

By

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to show that religion is neither irrelevant nor antithetical to ethics; it aims, ultimately, to recover the significance of religion for ethics. The germ of this project is threefold. First, it is grounded in the conviction that religion holds significance for moral discourse and that this relevance is not sufficiently acknowledged in philosophical ethics. Furthermore, philosophical ethics is considered unsatisfying insofar as it seems that being moral is not simply a matter of good, rational decision-making (though moral existence entails this). Finally and most importantly, the focus on the moral "agent" and the language of "praise and blame" seems to indicate an implicit egoism, which jars with moral virtue. This last conviction and the turn to otherness in postmodern thought allow me to build a bridge from secular philosophical ethics to a religious ethic of attention. My argument is that religion enables us to become more other-centered, an ethos that is putatively central to postmodern thought, insofar as religion or, more precisely, religious faith is the practice of attentive looking (to God). I have thus suggested that the turn to "the other" in contemporary ethics can be realized by the looking of prayer and worship. I have engaged with two thinkers in the attempt to think this idea through: feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen and French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. Weil provides a discussion of attention as the activity of grace, and will, which she understands as the dominating activity of the self; this distinction allows me to explore the possibility that religion or religious faith leads to a transformed, less egoistic, ethic. Moreover, it is Weil's understanding of faith as "waiting for God" which enables me, ultimately, to establish the connection between attending to God (religious faith) and responding appropriately to the other (ethics).

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For integrity is the fruit of freedom. The slave will always ask: What will serve my interests? It is the free [human being] who is able to transcend the causality of interest and deed, of act and the desire for personal reward. It is the free man who asks: Why should I be interested in my interests? What are the values I ought to feel in need of serving? But inner freedom is *spiritual ecstasy*, the state of being beyond all interests and selfishness. Inner freedom is a miracle of the soul. How could such a miracle be achieved? It is the dedication of heart and mind to the fact of our being present at a concern of God, the knowledge of being a part of an eternal spiritual movement that conjures power out of a weary conscience, that, striking the bottom out of conceit, tears selfishness to shreds. It is a sense of the ineffable that leads us to realize the absurdity of regarding the ego as an end. There is no other way to feel one with every [human being], with the leper or with the slave, except in feeling one with [him or her] in a higher unity: in the one concern of God for all [people]. (Abraham Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, 14)

Praise to God and compassion for creatures. It is the same movement of the heart. (Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 102)

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernity, Particularity, and Religion

It is characteristic of most postmodern philosophy to begin by defining itself in contradistinction from modern philosophy. From Habermas to Rorty to Foucault to Gadamer, all have made their contribution to philosophy by critiquing the ahistorical subject of modern rationality. Embodiment, inter-subjectivity, historicism – these are now the 'classic' catchphrases of postmodernity. Interestingly, when we appeal to such notions as embodiment and intersubjectivity, we seek to re-integrate the body, or the gender, or the race, or the culture – *but not all cultures*. A culture that was or is the dominant culture is typically denied a voice at these symposia where 'all' voices are accepted. The reasoning follows the lines of: this is the voice that is heard and heard so loudly and clearly that everyone knows the sound of that voice and moreover, the sound of that voice is the *only* one we know because it has drowned out all other voices in the process. The aim of postmodern philosophy, if it could be said to have an aim - perhaps one should say orientation - is to 'make space' for *other* voices. I wonder, however, whether *in the case of religion* either of the premises that support the silencing of the 'traditional' voice is true. Is it really true that the 'dominant' voice of faith in the West, namely, Christianity, is known and known well? Or, is it the case that faith, in general, has been marginalized by modern western philosophy and that it is among the 'others' that need to be recalled from the past so that we might be able to better know our 'embodied' selves? Is religious faith resonant in the dominant voice in philosophy or is *it* an 'other?' It seems that the postmodern emphasis on particularity is not incompatible with an attempt to recollect our religious histories. This

recuperative project has, in turn, implications of the following nature: perhaps the dismissal of religious faith in the sphere of ethical discourse[1] will be deemed unjustified and, moreover, faith seen as a *necessary* element for a genuinely other-centered ethic. Otherwise stated, perhaps there is the possibility of an ethic conceived in light of the postmodern turn to the other in which religious consciousness plays a central role.

Basic Starting Principles

There are three convictions underlying this current project. One of them is that traditional philosophical ethics is, to a significant degree, unsatisfactory, insofar as it portrays moral life as a series of exercises in *subject-centered* judgment and action. [2] The recent turn to other-centered thinking in postmodern philosophy is a deep improvement upon the hitherto assumed perspective of the solipsistic subject, and thus, should be pursued in its fullest implications. While other-centered "reason" has permeated metaphysical discourse (or the destruction thereof), political philosophy, epistemology and ethics, it is evident that in the last instance, work at the meta-level is still much in progress. Hence, we are interested in exploring otherness as it impacts moral philosophy.

A second foundational conviction of this project is that the *reasoning* process of a person participating in the moral sphere of life is more accurately described as a *retrospective* (or *recollective*) investigation of what 'doing the right thing' entails, rather than a *prospective* (i.e.

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[1] Modern ethics is generally a secularized affair and divine command theory is an impoverished religious ethic at best.

[2] I am acquiring this interpretation of philosophical ethics from Grace Jantzen, and other postmodern thinkers who have raised problems with subject-centered discourse. I recognize that this is a debatable starting point, but due to the scope of the current project, it shall be accepted.

linear reasoning) consideration of various possible acts of goodness. What this means is that I understand the process of moral decision-making to presuppose certain "values", and hence, the "application" of ethical principles in any given "moral dilemma" is, in fact, reflective rather than projective. (The use of scare quotes is to indicate that "values", "application of principles" and "moral dilemmas" are part of a certain kind of moral discourse, to which I do not necessarily ascribe.) Implied in this is the notion that one's philosophy of existence or "worldview" is integral to ethics, since one's conceptions of goodness and rightness arise out of one's worldview. In other words, if it is acknowledged that ethics involves uncovering and realizing in act what we *already* know about goodness or virtue, that ethics is not a procedure through which we "discover" the good or right action by a process of linear, logical, reasoning, then we are led to consider what informs our moral base.

This leads me to the third belief that undergirds this thesis, which is that religious faith has been and *still is* a fundamental source of values (or *ethoi*). While secular society may think that we are through with religion, it is quite clear that religion, in the form of values, is not through with us. Thus, if ethics involves recollecting our values and religion is a fount of values, then religion cannot be ignored in meta-ethical discourse. These convictions, taken together, lead me to believe that religious faith has a significant and intimate connection with ethics and can perhaps be the meta-ethical ground upon which to build an other-centered ethic of attention. Thus, it is this relationship between ethics and religion that shall now be explored.

Kierkegaard Sets the Problem... The Ethical Humanist's Stance

Many will be skeptical of this project, as many reject religion on *ethical* grounds.[3] Since Kierkegaard's articulation of a *teleological suspension of the ethical*, it has often been thought that participation in the religious life is necessarily a renunciation of the moral life, in fact, a *transgression* of it. Despite the fact that this is not an accurate rendering of Kierkegaard's account of the ethical-religious relation, [4] it has become one of the most popular arguments cited against religious existence. Ethical humanists understand being *religious* as tantamount to being *unethical*, and religion, as an institutionalized social practice, as oppressive, dangerous, and essentially immoral. [5] The aim of the present thesis is to question these beliefs, to explore the possibility that religious faith can be seen as not only cooperative with ethics, but as the condition for the possibility of a transformed, more authentic ethic.

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[3] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 487. Contemporary moral philosopher Iris Murdoch makes a statement reflective of this reticence toward religion in ethics today: "Thinkers of the Enlightenment, however, and many since, have held, often rightly, that organized, institutionalized religion is an enemy of morality, an enemy of freedom and free thought, guilty of cruelty and repression. This has been so and in many quarters is so. Therefore the whole institution may be rationally considered to be discredited or outmoded. ."

[4] Kierkegaard has been interpreted as saying that faith and ethics are incommensurable, that one must choose between them. According to many of his interpreters, Kierkegaard is claiming that a commitment to God requires a suspension of one's commitment to others. Yet, this interpretation terminates at Kierkegaard's discussion of the teleological suspension of the ethical, which is not Kierkegaard's ultimate construal of the relationship between religious faith and ethics. In *Fear and Trembling*, wherein the famous discussion of the tension between faith and ethics is presented, Kierkegaard also states,
"The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as individual absolutely to the absolute. In this connection, to say that it is a duty to love God means something different from the above, for if this duty is absolute, then the ethical is reduced to the relative. *From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor – an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty.*" (70, FT)

[5] While I recognize that religion has been and may still be all of these things at the level of nation-state politics, it is not necessarily the case that religion at the level of personal faith might have these same ethical consequences.

Egoism: A Problem for Philosophical Ethics (how to preserve ethics from being a self-centered enterprise?)

The desire to justify religious ethics presupposes that ethics, as a *philosophical* discipline, requires transformation and authentication. Such an assertion may seem enigmatic to anyone who believes that the philosophical investigation of how humans ought to act and be in the world is, as it stands, fruitful. What is inadequate about ethics, as we know it through the legacies of Kant, Mill and Aristotle? Have they not provided concepts and paradigms which elucidate the perennial human concern with goodness and rightness? In what way are the answers they have postulated misguided on the nature of human moral experience?

While it is not the case that philosophical ethics is irredeemably flawed, it does appear that philosophical ethics is, in some respects, inadequate since it has yet to fully *integrate* understandings of goodness (or virtue) and understandings of duty. In particular, philosophical ethics has yet to provide an adequate account of the problem of implicit egoism that confronts most modern accounts of ethics. Clearly, there is some sort of incongruency between goodness and self-interest. We tend to find an action or a character *less than good* if he or she is ultimately self-serving or self-enhancing. Yet many actions and persons are considered ethically commendable *despite* the fact that there may be egocentric motives at their root. Ethics premised on the language of rights, for example, is an ethic that *allows* for people to behave as they ought to (duty), thereby being hailed as ethical, and yet, to *not* act out of interest for the other (self-interest). In this case, one's respect for another is contingent upon the other party's respect for oneself. One only behaves in a particular way because one demands the same treatment for

oneself. The basic, yet implicit, category in rights-based ethics is *exchange*. What appears to be a charitable or unselfish disposition toward another is really not charitable or unselfish at all, it is simply acting so as to ensure one's own deliverance, should one be in the same, unfortunate position as the other. This cannot be charity, insofar as in charity there is *no expectation of return and the self is not at the heart of the ethical act.* The question might be raised: what role does charity have in ethics at all? In response to this, one could say that while charity may not be *prima facie* an essential characteristic of good behavior or character, it is clear that exchange or trade is *not* an appropriate category for ethics. Perhaps we need to find a term other than charity to capture this *non*-exchange quality of ethical life (perhaps not) but, at this point, we are merely signaling the problem.

It is my conviction that the challenge posed by ethical egoism to modern ethical theory can be fruitfully addressed by introducing the element of religious faith. In the Medieval Period, religious doctrine was the foundation of ethical reasoning. Since then, however, in philosophy, faith and reason have generally been held apart, and reason and ethics united. Countering this modern development, I hope to show that investing ethics with a religious temper can address the egocentric predicament currently evaded in many modern accounts of ethics.

The Conceptual Roadblock Between Religion and Ethics

Insofar as it has been established that there is a need to ameliorate philosophical ethics, the possibility of a faith-informed ethic is worth exploring. There are, however, at least three well-known and serious philosophical concerns surrounding religious ethics. The first is that religion has been the cause of a great deal of unsocial, unethical behaviour in the past. Hence, some find

it oxymoronic to even speak of religion and responsibility in the same sentence. A popular philosophical perspective on the matter is that one's religious convictions pull one *away* from the social sphere, rather than reconcile one with others. As such, responsibility is *ignored* in one's faithfulness to one's religion. In addition, a religious doctrine such as grace seems to *absolve* one of responsibility. If one's actions are sanctioned by the will of God, then one is not considered the agent of them. If responsibility implies agency and grace precludes agency, then grace essentially cancels human responsibility. Thus, religion either competes with responsibility and wins, or it nullifies the latter through the doctrine of grace, in which case ethical responsibility no longer exists as a category for the religious person. Finally, religious ethics faces the objection that it is epistemologically exclusivist and therefore impossible to implement, since ethics demands *universally* acknowledged principles. This challenge assumes an understanding of both ethics and religion as primarily matters of reason and rationality.

Yet, what is meant by 'responsibility'? Is it something that must be mutually *recognized* between the 'agent' and the 'recipient' of a good act or potential mode of behavior? Or can there be responsibility that is not recognized by all ethical agents? What is meant by 'religious faith'? How is 'grace' understood? Our aim is to better understand these concepts over the course of this thesis.

Religious Faith Relativizes Human Worth... Or Does It?

Perhaps the underlying and ultimate concern of ethical humanists is that we relativize human worth when we affirm God's absolute worth. This is not an unwarranted worry. This, however, is the very same concern – diminishing human worth, that is, - which leads me to argue

for the *importance* of recognizing the divine. When we absolutize our own worth in a way that *distorts or belies* our finite nature, it seems to me that we are doing ourselves the greatest disservice, for we are falsifying who we are to ourselves. Our finite nature is a phenomenological fact that cannot be ignored. It is clear that we are not in absolute control; it is beyond dispute that we do not always decide which events will occur in our lives. While we are free, our freedom is a limited freedom, *within* contexts, *with* contingency. These are widely acknowledged truths. Moreover, while it is true that freedom is the condition for the possibility of moral action, it is equally true that the *kind* of freedom we have conditions the *kinds* of actions that are available to us. Now, insofar as affirming the reality of God is for believers, among other things, the recognition of our deep finitude, it seems that rather than relativizing our importance, asserting God's absolute power simply allows us to *fully* affirm our humanity, *in its finitude*. It therefore allows for more effective moral action, since it prevents false assumptions of human power.

In contrast, an agent-centered ethic trumps the freedom and the power of the moral agent, misleading the agent into a conception of him or herself as a subject for whose consideration all moral decisions are laid out. To understand oneself in this way is to objectify the world and to reduce it to that which is *observed* rather than *attended* to. Moreover, it leads to an attitude of *affecting* the world, which, I believe, runs counter to an acknowledgement of human finitude, insofar as the corollary of human finitude is that there exists something beyond us, such as the world (a given, not a human *construct*). This does not amount to a denial of the possibility of fruitful human activity in the world. It is simply a challenge to the *understanding* of fruitful action as that which originates from *us*, and of which we can then claim *ownership*. What does it

mean to speak of good action as "*our* good action"? Is this a statement about goodness? Or is it a claim concerning moral 'capital'? The question is where our emphasis lies in discussing and participating in moral life.

In addition to speaking of the good as something that belongs to us, egoism reveals itself in philosophical moral discourse in the concepts of praise and blame. When we speak of the good as being the criterion for positive or negative judgment of us, it becomes something *for us*, which seems to reduce goodness to a thing of instrumental worth. More to the point, when we use these terms, moral actions become reason for self-enhancement, rather than solely interest in and for others. I hope to show that it is possible to have an ethical discourse that is free from such egoistic undercurrents, by redescribing our moral universe in the language of the faith. A religious consciousness, with its associated concept of grace, may be able to evade instrumentalizing the good, by putting it beyond us, rather than of (i.e. originating or emanating from) us. Hence, the claim that is here being made is that not only is it *not* necessarily the case that love of God leads to neglect of or dismissiveness towards other humans (though it can); it shall be argued that love of God is what makes it possible for us to love others, since it first impugns our egoistic selves.

Worship Leads to an Ethic of Compassion

I an interested in exploring the impact of grace, prayer, and worship on moral life. Moral philosophers have long ago discredited these concepts and activities, as they seem to signify abstinence from social, and hence moral, involvement. To "sit in a church pew and pray" is a culturally accepted synonym for "doing nothing." This, however, demonstrates a one-sided

understanding of activity, as something visible and public. Since activity can be *both* interior and exterior, -- philosophers grant that *contemplation* is an activity -- it is not *prima facie* true that grace, prayer and worship have nothing to do with ethics ("activity"). One of the central aims of this thesis is to show that we have only heard one narrative concerning these realities and that it is not necessarily the most accurate or interesting one. I will give another account of these realities to demonstrate how these religious categories and modes of being are completely compatible with an ethical orientation to the world.

Let me expound briefly on these topics. On the face of it, surrender (i.e. religious ecstasy) and responsibility (ethics) seem to be antithetical concepts. What if, however, our responsibility *is* to surrender? If this were the case, then would not a relationship that teaches us *how* to surrender enable us to fulfill our ethical duty? **Worship** is the definitive act of surrender; it is an utterly other-centered activity. Perhaps, then, it is the prerequisite activity for *response-ability* to the other. Moreover, the concept of **grace** combats moral *in*fallibility and egotism, since on this understanding of goodness we are only mediums for goodness, not creators or originators of it. Goodness flows *through* us rather than from us. Finally, the activity of attention, worship or prayer implies that there is a reality which guides us to right action. While some might contend that grace is a slippery source of moral direction, it should be noted that this criticism implies that what we are seeking in our ethical theory is an instrument that facilitates the business of making good moral decisions. Ethical issues, however, are *not* easy matters and, in fact, it seems that any ethical theory which effectively *simplifies* moral existence, should, on that ground alone, be viewed with suspicion. Nevertheless, there would be no point in worship if there were no

conviction that there is something that is wiser than ourselves that can bring us closer to goodness (but the chasm that exists between human beings and goodness may not even be an issue of knowledge, but rather, *desire*). Under this framework, we are fallible insofar as we are not attentive to reality, and good insofar as we allow the object of our attention (which is also the object of our desire) to lead us. Hopefully, these remarks shed some light on how religious consciousness has a tendency toward the other which is conducive to the practice of an other-centered ethic.

PART ONE

Grace Jantzen is the favoured point of entry for the present attempt to elucidate the relationship between religion and ethics, since she offers a substantial philosophical vision with which one can engage both critically and appreciatively.[6] Her aim, like mine, is to uncover a means, in light of the present-day skepticism surrounding religion, whereby religion and ethics can be held in tandem, - she might say in *union*, - rather than apart. Jantzen provides a critique of the emphasis on epistemology in philosophy of religion, reorients the import of religion into ethical territory, and problematizes the subject-centered ethics typically practiced in philosophy. Jantzen also involves in her project one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, Emanuel Levinas, the man who ingrained in postmodernity the notion that ethics is the special 'home' of the other. This first chapter will introduce the reader to Jantzen's project, pausing on the parts of her conceptual journey that are most relevant to this thesis, namely: the wasteland of traditional (i.e. epistemological) philosophy of religion, the frenzied intersection of traditional discussions of religion and morality, and the promising hinterland of postmodern ethics of the other.

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The 'Patriarchal Necrophillia' of Traditional Philosophy of Religion

Grace Jantzen is interested in achieving a voice for female subjectivity. As a philosopher of religion, she pursues this feminist aim through issues particular to this area. Yet, while Jantzen may acknowledge the topics that are typically discussed in the philosophy of religion, she does not passively accept the approaches that have been used to seek understanding on these same topics. She does not accept the traditional approaches in philosophy of religion since she regards their manner of speech as complicit with the 'patriarchal necrophilia' that pervades most of modern philosophy. Jantzen, appealing to the strain of postmodernism peculiar to Derrida,

[6] The work of Jantzen's on which I will be focusing is her 1999 publication, *Becoming Divine: Towards A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Henceforth, referred to as 'BD.'

claims that there is a hidden *symbolic* operative in philosophy of religion that seeks to preserve the power of the male and, thereby, the meaninglessness of female existence. To be more explicit, Jantzen sees the epistemological overtones of philosophy of religion discourse as privileging a detached, purely rational - in other words, *disembodied* – perspective, such that the particular, the embodied, the emotive, the real, the imaginative are stifled in the name of 'conceptual clarity.' She thereby calls for a radical re-thinking of the necrophilic *symbolic* that is operative in all of western philosophy, and suggests that a feminist symbolic, a symbolic of natality and flourishing, be embraced instead. According to Jantzen, if we re-conceive the aim of philosophy of religion as a reflective imagining of human ideals, rather than an assessment of the justification of truth-claims of believers, then philosophy of religion can potentially be the starting-point for women's subjectivity and gender equality. Once we reflect on the ways in which women have been neglected in the imagining and understanding of the divine, we can arrive at a greater understanding of how women have been marginalized and, more importantly, how this process can be reversed. In other words, we can begin to conceive of a divine horizon that allows for the flourishing of *all* humans.

Jantzen contends that "necrophilia" is so embedded in philosophical discourse that it conceals its own value-laden character. "Necrophilia" is a way of thinking which privileges everything that humans are not: immortality, infinitude, absolute power, detached, universal reason, spirit, absolute knowledge, and *the* Truth. Thus, it is a rejection of human existence and a drive towards death. Moreover, it privileges everything that is prized by *traditional males*. The privileging of these qualities is concomitant with the suppression of respect for natality, finitude,

emotion, desire, embodiment, partiality, and creativity. Insofar as females have typified these latter qualities, which are, moreover, common to *all humans*, denial of these human ideals can be interpreted as patriarchy.

Jantzen points out that necrophilia is a symbolic that traditional, in other words, male, philosophers have *chosen*. Hence, there is yet available "the path less trodden." This path is the religious symbolic of natality. Since Jantzen does not understand philosophy of religion as the contemplation of the realities of God, faith, reason and revelation, but rather as the imaginative exercise of creating new symbolics for human flourishing, she employs the language of a religious *symbolic* of natality. This new symbolic highlights the common ground that unites all humans: birth. By adopting 'birth' rather than 'death' as the conceptual base, the first principle of human reality shifts from subjectivity to inter-subjectivity. Birth necessarily involves human relationship and, specifically, a relationship of dependency. Moreover, birth is the exemplary illustration of the dependency of all humans on the *maternal*; privileging this fact, therefore, paves the way for the recognition of women as subjects.

The symbolic of natality is not, however, a symbolic which benefits women only. A symbolic which has birth as its root metaphor esteems *all* natals and supports justice for all, as opposed to justice for the powerful few. A feminist symbolic of natality prioritizes "the other," or "the marginalized" precisely because privileging this perspective leads to social justice, a chief feminist goal. Justice for women, marginalized men, gays, lesbians, and other "others" allows for the human flourishing of all, whereas partial social justice necessarily involves human degradation.

What *is* Symbolic?

In order to understand Jantzen's project, we must first understand her 'language-game.' What does Jantzen mean by *symbolic*? She is referring to the Lacanian notion of an unconscious that accompanies our conscious life, though it is repressed. A symbolic can be said to operate in a manner similar to a worldview, although a symbolic may be even less structured than a worldview. Nonetheless, it is what underlies the values that we explicitly affirm; in fact, it is *the* evaluation out of which all other values arise. A symbolic therefore has significant repercussions for morality. Insofar as it is recognized that the religious symbolic is as dominant a power as any other symbolic (be it scientific, legal, or economic), it cannot afford to be ignored in the work of any 'responsible thinker.' This is, in effect, the reason why Jantzen esteems the postmodern approach to philosophy of religion over the 'traditional, Anglo-American' style of philosophizing about religion. The unproblematized knowledge and language about God employed by Anglo-American philosophers of religion allows for the entrenchment of a system of values which *de*values and subjugates women and other marginalized groups. Jantzen, however, similar to the Habermasian feminist, Seyla Benhabib, does not wish to relinquish modern discourse altogether. While she appeals to postmodern insights to inform her own methodology of philosophizing about religion, she still holds to the modern values of agency and autonomy in ethics. Hence, when Jantzen speaks of decentering the subject, she is not advocating the abandonment of modern ethical concepts of autonomy and agency. The postmodern turn does mean, however, that agency and autonomy are problematized since they often come at the

expense of other de-subjectivized subjects. According to the postmodern interpretation, 'the subject' is typically male and the aim is thus to topple this conception of the self in order to empower all forgotten or ignored 'others.'

Thus, Jantzen treats religion as an unconscious schema of values that foregrounds our moral precepts and practices. In her article, 'What's the Difference? Knowledge and Gender in (Post) Modern Philosophy of Religion,' [7] Jantzen distinguishes between religion as "about God and God's relations to the world" (the 'British' conception of philosophy of religion) and religion as "that which subtends civilization" (the 'postmodern' conception of philosophy of religion), or the unconscious which structures our consciousness. Jantzen clearly indicates her preference for the latter notion of religion. Insofar as Jantzen understands religion as *constitutive* of our world and our understandings in much the same way as is a language, she sees the need for a new language because the old language is a power discourse which leaves many 'others' out. It should be noted that this definition of religion derives from the Freudian account of religion as the projection of human desires; this point shall assume greater significance in the forthcoming section on the adequacy of the conception of religion as symbolic.

The Moral Import of a Revised Philosophy of Religion

Arguing for a radical reorientation of a discipline requires that one demonstrate the inadequacy of existing modes of practice. Jantzen thus critiques the detached, epistemological

[7] Jantzen, "What's the Difference? Knowledge and Gender in (Post) Modern Philosophy of Religion." *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 431-448.

emphasis in traditional philosophy of religion prior to positing her symbolic of natality. The essence of the critique is aesthetic and moral: what kind of values do we affirm when we focus on mortality, salvation and the 'other-worldly?' There is a distinct Nietzschean[8] flavour to her critique of traditional religious concepts[9]: (the) religion (of Christianity) is a conceptual framework that is life-denying rather than life-affirming, thus prompting the need for the revaluation of all values. One could almost interpret Jantzen as attempting to meet the putative task set by Nietzsche: that is, the call to create and, particularly, the call to create a new humanity. Yet, while it seems that she is simply loosening the structures of analytic philosophy in order to make space for her own creative project, Jantzen's work is more normative than that. It becomes clear in the latter chapters of *Becoming Divine*, that the motivating concerns for Jantzen, philosopher of religion, are *moral* concerns. In fact, Jantzen states this propensity at the outset (on the first page of the first chapter), where she essentially cites continental feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray as providing both the origin and telos of her project:

> For Irigaray, our fundamental moral obligation is to become divine; and the task of philosophy of religion must be to enable that becoming, or else it is ultimately useless.

Jantzen continues,

> Insofar as becoming divine is indeed an appropriate aim, I shall show how it radically changes the agenda of philosophy of religion. The rest

[8] I indicate this affinity between Nietzsche and Jantzen because I think that drawing this connection enables us to better interpret Jantzen's project.
[9] BD, 6

> of the book will explore in much more detail what is involved in the aim of becoming divine, and how it resonates with a symbolic of natality. [10]

The language of *obligation* is significant. 'Becoming divine' is not simply a novel and appealing idea; it is, according to Irigaray and Jantzen, our *moral obligation.* This is why the latter chapters, which focus on the moral significance of this symbolic, are, in my opinion, key to understanding the central point of the book.

Jantzen is greatly troubled by the uncoupling of religious discourse from ethical action. For Jantzen, religion *cannot be separated* from socio-ethical engagement and still be esteemed. Religion is only deserving of the name if it reveals itself in just and moral social action. She makes some strong – some commendably strong - statements regarding this disjunction:

> But when 'salvation' is about what happens after death, when philosophers consider it their business to ponder the eternal destiny but not the living hell of people's lives, then they are in fact colluding with rather than challenging the oppressive structures which 'deprive the living of the power to live' [11]

> If we do not see the face of the Other, if we do not respond to human suffering and need, then it does not make much difference whether our religion is a matter of pious observance, personal religious experience, or theological sophistication: it is evil. [12]

Jantzen wishes to return the religious gaze to *this* world, since she understands worship *as* working to achieve the ends of social justice. In other words, there is no way to experience the

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[10] BD, 6-7
[11] BD, 147
[12] BD, 253

divine apart from how we relate to oppressed human beings in the present. Where these are ignored, there is no faith, only evil.

Moreover, Jantzen is unreservedly critical of the *egocentrism* inherent in most discussions of religion and morality. Since we agree with Jantzen that "the other... is the fulcrum on which any discussion of religion and morality must rest," (231) we include an extended quote from her chapter on the discussion that takes place at the interface of traditional philosophy of religion and philosophical ethics:

> Adams and Swinbourne are far from exceptional in treating the issues of morality and religion in terms focused on the moral agent and 'his' moral status... What I want to consider more deeply is the absence of the other, the object or recipient of the agent's action. Why are these recipients not discussed? How is it that philosophers of religion find it possible to discuss the moral status of an agent as though this (and its religious consequences) are all that matter? Such preoccupation with one's own moral status, with an analysis of whether 'I' am good or bad, whether whatever happens I must ensure that my own hands remain clean (and I am confident that God will notice and reward me) is, I suggest, morally abhorrent. Of course it is important whether I am good or bad, but surely it is obvious that the fastest way to get things comprehensively wrong in this respect is to be focused on my own moral status rather than on the well-being and flourishing of others, acting with an eye to my own righteousness rather than for love of the world. Yet that world, those others, hardly make an appearance in the traditional writings of philosophers of religion when they treat of 'religion and morality'; and even when they do appear, it is still as recipients of actions which enable the assessment of the moral status of the agent. There could hardly be a greater contrast with the ethics of Hannah Arendt or Emmanuel Levinas...where the other, the natals for whom I must care, are at the center of attention. [13]

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[13] BD, 230

Jantzen's critique of subject-centered, rationality-driven ethics arises from the basic intuition that ethics is not a self-centered enterprise; that it is, rather, social in its very character. She reiterates a theme common to (anti-relativistic varieties of) postmodern ethics: concern for the other is at the heart of living responsibly and with integrity. Jantzen applies this critique of traditional philosophical ethics to religious ethics, which generally works within the same discursive parameters as philosophical ethics. Simply put, agent-oriented ethics is *non*-ethical, insofar as ethics, properly understood, is an ethic of the other. This turn to the other arises from the deconstruction of the totalizing gaze of the modern subject, the gaze that sees others only as "generalized others" rather than "concrete others." [14]

Perhaps Jantzen paints the picture too dramatically when she asks, "Where are the others, in traditional philosophical ethical discourse?" It might be more accurate to say that those others are 'there,' but that they are 'there' problematically i.e. at the *periphery* of the field of vision of the rational moral agent, rather than at the *center* of the moral participant. One could even claim that traditional ethics embodies a desire to promote the goodness of the other *for* the other or, to use a postmodern 'trope,' to affirm the 'otherness of the other.' The problem in traditional ethics is not that there is no *desire* to respect the otherness of the other; on the contrary, this desire is plainly evident in the liberal-informed ethics of Mill and Kant. Rather, the point on which these ethical theories fail is the *methodology* they employ to achieve this end. The methodology

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[14]Benhabib, *The Situated Self*, chapter 5.

is not dialogical or personal; it is a kind of moral calculus applied by *a* moral agent to his of her moral dilemma. However, what is a dilemma? It is an existential category.

> Dilemmas are a powerful refutation of complacent rationalism. They undermine the view that if only we think hard enough, and are helped by the appropriate philosophical principles or System, we will finally uncover the solution to each of life's moral or spiritual problems... Dilemmas [however] reveal the depths of our vulnerability and care, the pervasiveness of suffering, and the fragile yet awesome resistance of human integrity. [15]

Jantzen, in her critique of *philosophers of religion* and their discussions of ethics, seems to have touched on a problem that pervades modern philosophical discourse of ethics in general. The kind of rationality that is operative in most ethical discourse is modern; as such, it seeks to reduce ethics to a scientific enterprise, whereby one can conduct thought experiments that will allow one to attain greater predictability capacities in ethical dilemmas. By the standard ethical 'methodology,' ethical problems come to resemble algebra problems. When an ethical problem is treated thus, the moral actors become pawns shuffled around for the greater good, the latter of which is determined by *one* agent, the one who shares in the dominant discourse. More dangerous still, ethics as traditionally conceived leads to an expectation of attainable certainty that is appropriate to mathematics, which belies the nature of moral experience.

Furthermore, though *Jantzen* would not make this critique, modernistic, rationalistic ethics of agency demonstrates that the equation of the notions of *freedom* and *autonomy* has debilitating consequences. When we link freedom with *auto*nomy, we privilege a positive

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[15] Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, 67.

connotation of the *individual* and implicitly undermine a *communal* notion of identity and, likewise, freedom. If autonomy is desirable, then our social constitution seems to be downgraded, insofar as others are first seen as infringements on our freedom. The social, in this case, signifies an aggregate of individuals rather than a group of *connected* people. The appeal of moral decision-making then derives from the grandeur of the possibility of exercising our will, our reason, as opposed to the chance to experience our connectedness and our need to consider deeply the reality of the other or others who face us. Although Jantzen does not take the ethic of the other this far i.e. into the territory of rights, we shall explore this issue more deeply when we discuss her philosophy in comparison with Simone Weil's.

Hence, one can understand Jantzen's turn to the ethic of the other as attempting to remedy the problem of patriarchy, which is, above all, a moral problem, and using the philosophy of religion to do so. Thus, her project is one that is profoundly *moral*. Jantzen marks 'modernism' as the target of her philosophical assault. She chooses to attend to the postmodern message in the hope that it will awaken us from our moral slumber. As we have already mentioned, Jantzen recognizes the significance of religious categories or, in her language, religious *symbolic* to the moral orientation of humanity. This calls us to ponder over Jantzen's redefinition of religiosity as a continual attempt to actualize the divine horizon, which in this case is justice for all and concern for the material well-being of all. What does Jantzen's religious symbolic call us to become when it calls us to 'become divine?' Does it lead to a deeper moral self? We shall return to this question in a later section.

Toward an Ethic of the Other

In her revision of what religion ought to be Jantzen does not merely unite ethics and religion; along with Emmanuel Levinas, Jantzen *prioritizes* the ethical over the onto-theological. For both, 'religious' and 'ethical' are two terms that describe the same thing. Accordingly, we shall now turn to Levinas, as understood through the interpretive lens of Jantzen. Levinas, according to Jantzen, understands ontology to be implicitly violent. This is due to the fact that ontology, the study of being, is chiefly motivated by the desire to know. Levinas interprets this desire as a violent one, since the mechanism by which one knows is appropriation or assimilation. Knowing is, metaphorically speaking, an act of violence, in which the object or the "other" is *digested* by the subject. The knowable object is radically altered in the process of knowing, rendered impotent by the dominating, knowing subject. In ontology, the known object is basically reduced to *the same* as the knowing subject. This privileging of sameness is called *egology.* [16] Moreover,

> If ethics is held to follow from being (as, for example, in a divine command theory of ethics, or indeed, in any attempt to ground morality in human nature), this effectively subordinates ethics to ontology. But this means that ethics itself is founded in violence – that is, in the unethical.[17]

[16] BD, 233
[17] Ibid.

In other words, if ontology is the basis of ethics, then the root of ethics is violence. Jantzen interprets Levinas to mean by this that ethics must therefore assume primacy over ontology, in the philosophical order of sub-disciplines, since the root of the ethical cannot be the unethical.

As an ethic of the other, Levinas' ethics is consistent with the feminist ethos, since both prioritize the other, and, particularly for feminists, the marginalized voice. Another mutual value in Levinasian and feminist ethics is the esteem of particularity over and against abstract universals. Whereas in onto-theology objects are not encountered as particulars, the "particular face of another" is precisely the focus of attention in ethics. Jantzen has thus felled two giants with one theoretical stone. By engaging Levinas in her development of a new feminist symbolic, Jantzen has not only discredited traditional philosophy of religion; in affirming an ethic of the other, she has also discredited traditional *ethics* with its focus on the moral *subject.* This is what Jantzen means by "disruption" of the necrophilic symbolic of western philosophy.

Jantzen, however, does not wholeheartedly adopt Levinas' ethic of the other for the substance of a feminist religious symbolic. Jantzen points out that there are problems with the notion of being "infinitely responsible for the other." She recognizes in this moral posture the privileged position of the one who speaks – in other words, this is a language and a call that is appropriate to the egoistic male subject; embraced by women subjects, however, it contains the possibility of perpetuating the historical pattern of women subjugating themselves for the world to the point of self-destruction. Jantzen further exposes Levinas' distinctly male subjectivity by showing that he has failed to problematize his own face. What if his face is the face that *calls out* to the other to be responsible, to serve, to empathize, to love? In other words, what if 'his' face is

the face of a woman? Jantzen's critique of Levinas raises the interesting question of whether there *can* be universalism in ethics (i.e. an ethic that *everyone* must embrace), even if it is an ethic of love. Is it fair or even possible to ask a member of an oppressed group to be 'infinitely responsible' for the other, namely, its oppressor? The point Jantzen seems to want to drive home is that her ethic is an ethic of finitude and that Levinas' ethic is inadequate insofar as he tends to harbour illusions of an infinite capacity to be serve and be responsible. Interestingly, Jantzen does not see a performative contradiction in critiquing the Levinasian subject, whom she calls to humility, and the employment of her own rhetoric, which calls us to 'become divine' and 'gods for ourselves'. She does not seem to see the boldness of her own position. Perhaps this is because Jantzen is not endorsing a universalist ethic, but an ethic for women subjects. Since it is not the aim of this thesis to discern and evaluate the theoretical requirements of a *feminist* ethic, we will not pursue this issue much further, except to say that Jantzen's promotion of the pursuit of divinity *perhaps* evades the charge of egoism, given the audience that she is addressing and those on whose behalf she speaks.

Collapsing Religion into Morality?

We have determined that becoming divine is a matter of ethics. To use Kantian language, God is a *regulatory ideal.* As such, she or he does not reach beyond the realm of ethical action; rather, the activity of 'godding' is an ethical i.e. an immanent one. Since ethics is the discipline concerning right relations *between humans*, one could interpret Jantzen to be saying that divinity *consists in* human relationships. Jantzen herself invokes Sharon Welch in defining 'trustworthy community,' whereby God becomes the healing quality of "relational power":

> [Welch] says, 'the divine is that relational power, and... it is neither necessary nor liberating to posit a ground that exists outside of relational power.' (173) [...]
> 'Divinity is not a mark of that which is other than the finite. Grace is not that which comes from outside to transform the conditions of finitude. Divinity, or grace, is the resilient, fragile, healing power of finitude itself. The terms holy and divine denote a quality of being within the web of life, a process of healing relationship, and they denote the quality of being worthy of honour, love, respect and affirmation.' (178) [18]

Now, the question arises as to how possible it is to conceive of God solely *as* those aspects of human life that are *most* full of life, and to still affirm that this constitutes a *divine* horizon: for equating God with human ideals or "our deepest desires" seems to transform God into an ethical horizon rather than a divine one. Is religion then simply another name for ethics? Though the *herethic* of justice and love for all the world may seem to be the divinization of the world, are we really living in light of God, that which is greater than us, or are we serving ourselves?

> The point here is that it is the deepest and best of human desires (or at least what are taken to be such), which are projected as the divine horizon. To this extent, religion is in service of human fulfillment. [19]

Is our faith in a God at all, or is it wholly in the capacity of humankind to "heal itself?" Where is God in all of this? And if God is absent, is this still religion? (And if religion is absent, can we still recognize our finitude and turn our non-totalizing gaze to the other?)

Others share the same skepticism with respect to the language of religious symbolics. Among them is Alvin Plantinga, one of the most prominent philosophers of religion writing today,

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[18] BD, 222
[19] Ibid., 91

> Creative anti-realism can seem faintly or more than faintly ridiculous; nevertheless, it is widely accepted and an extremely important force in the contemporary intellectual world. Vast stretches of contemporary Continental philosophy, for example, are anti-realist. There is existentialism, according to which, at least in its Sartrean varieties, each of us structures or creates the world by way of our own decisions. There is also contemporary Heideggarian hermeneutical philosophy of various stripes; *there is contemporary French philosophy*, much of which beggars description, but insofar as anything at all is clear about it, is clearly anti-realist. [20]

Jantzen, however, is not unaware of this critique; nor has she left it unanswered. In fact, Jantzen's work in the first half of *Becoming Divine*, which undermines all philosophy of religion that is epistemologically and ontologically flavoured, does not even allow Plantinga's question to be asked.

> But with such a *radical reinterpretation* of religion in ethical rather than ontological terms, does this not amount to reductionism? *Why continue to use the language of religion at all?* From Levinas' perspective, which is on this key point at one with the feminist position I have been developing, the crucial point is to note that *such questions could be asked only from a framework which implicitly already accepts ontology and its attendant belief-structures as basic*, whether the religious questions are answered affirmatively or negatively. [21]

This, I argue, is a problematic way to preempt the charge, insofar as a framework which does not allow itself to be challenged from the outside is an instantiation of what Jeffrey Stout calls 'self-

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[20] Percesepe, "Against Appropriation: Postmodern Programs, Claimants, Contests, Conversations." *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Westphal, 73.
[21] BD, 252

regulating' philosophy.[22] This meaning that it sets its own problematic and moves in such a way that it arrives at its conclusion only by virtue of its value-laden starting-points, which deactivate alternative understandings at the outset.

It should be possible to isolate the desirability of some aspects of a philosophical vision without affirming it in its entirety. In this case, one ought to be able to affirm Jantzen's concern over the severance of the religious from the ethical, yet reject Jantzen's suggestion of a religious symbolic which calls us to become divine. Simply put, it seems that her aim of transfiguring philosophy of religion so as to transform our moral posture, which, as we have earlier established, is a key concern, need not "*repeat the possibility of religion without religion.*" (Derrida).

> The Christian themes...infinite love, sin and salvation, repentance and sacrifice. What engenders all these meanings and links them, internally and necessarily, is a logic that at bottom has no need *of the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event.* It needs to think the possibility of such an event but not the event itself. This is a major point of difference, permitting such a discourse to be developed without reference to religion as institutional dogma, and proposing a genealogy of thinking concerning the possibility and essence of the religious that doesn't amount to an article of faith. If one takes into account certain differences, the same can be said for many discourses that seek in our day to be religious – discourses of a philosophical type if not philosophies themselves -- without putting forth theses or *theologems* that would by their very structure teach something corresponding to the dogmas of a given religion. The difference is subtle and unstable, and it would call for careful and vigilant analyses. The discourses of Levinas or Marion, perhaps of Ricoeur also, are in the same situation as that of Patocka. ...belong to this tradition that consists of proposing a nondogmatic doublet of dogma, a philosophical and metaphysical

[22] Stout, *The Flight From Authority: Religion, Morality, and th eQuest for Autonomy*, 180.

> doublet, in any case a thinking that "repeats" the possibility of religion without religion. [23]

I would say that Jantzen, too, belongs to this postmodern "tradition" which deals with the religion-morality tension by, as I see it, *redefining religion as morality.* The problem with this movement is that it seems to be an implicit form of humanism, though no one would ever openly call it such. No one, in light of the postmodern maxims of situatedness, partiality, and finitude, is going to suggest that we make ourselves the measure of all things, place ourselves at the apex or the center of the universe, in short, be infinite. Yet, what does it mean to "become divine?" What does it mean to suggest that God is a projection that enables *our* divine becoming? That it is our *responsibility* to become divine and that religion is simply an enabler of that quest for divinity? Jantzen ingeniously invalidates all the possibilities that *traditional* religious practices offer for "giving life" by subsuming all things traditional under the symbolic of "patriarchal necrophilia." Her innovative project is hence a welcome piece of work for most people since we are in an age where ethics *is* the new religion, the highest telos. The prevalent view today is that we must change religion if we are going to preserve its importance or keep it relevant.[24] My difficulty with this approach, as exemplified by Jantzen's work, is that religion is redefined to the point that it no longer resembles religion: if there is no real God, then what becomes of worship, prayer, ritual and faith? If these elements are absent, then what do religious concepts signify?

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[23] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 49.

[24] Even among those who speak from within 'tradition': see, for example, Bishop Spong, *Why the Church Must Change or Die.*

In the extended quote from Derrida, Levinas is mentioned as one of those who propose a "nondogmatic doublet of dogma." Clearly, Levinas is transforming the meaning of religion (as ethics) and, clearly, Jantzen shares his suspicion and hope for religion. Jantzen quotes Levinas as saying that "probably religion is always adrift" [25] and, "Watch out for the peace of private worship! ...the artificial peace of synagogues and churches!' [26] Here, we must pause and ask, "Who is the offending party? Onto-theologians? Or believers who worship a real God in a traditional manner?" While we have no objection to Jantzen's attack of the epistemological construction of religious experience by philosophers, it is quite a different assertion, and one that Jantzen has not argued for, to claim that religious experience itself tends to cultivate an indifference to morality. Jantzen has somehow made the transition from a critique of the philosophy of religion, which she claims perpetuates a necrophillic worldview, to a critique of religious practice, and essentially on the same grounds. Originally, Jantzen argued that the philosophy of religion should conceive of and evaluate religion as *symbolic* (of our history and culture.) The significance of the religious symbolic is that it informs our moral imagination; in fact, it *is* our moral imagination. To the extent that a religious symbolic precludes the possibility of women becoming divine, this symbolic is patriarchal, necrophillic, and must be refigured. As her project develops, Jantzen discusses the ethic that accompanies a symbolic of natality. She expounds an ethic of the other that she appropriates from Emanuel Levinas. There is a connection made between the ethic of agency that derives from a necrophillic religious symbolic

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[25] BD, 182
[26] BD, 193

and the ethic of the other that arises from a symbolic of natality. Jantzen endorses the abandonment of the former in favour of the latter. Jantzen, however, proceeds then to cast suspicion on religious practices. While Jantzen may be giving a fair empirical assessment of prevalent modes of practice of religious faith, it is nevertheless vital to recognize that she is no longer speaking of symbolics and that there is something philosophically questionable about shifting a critique of a certain religious *symbolic* to the traditional *practice* of religion. Clearly, they are not the same thing, although it is true that a critique of any symbolic will not leave its attendant practices untouched. (How else is a symbolic to be deciphered, if not from embodied, concretized institutions and practices?) Yet, insofar as religious practices such as prayer and worship have not received much *explicit* treatment at the hands of Jantzen, there seems to be less ground for her critical judgment on this point, than there is for the latent necrophillia of the traditional religious symbolic. To be more precise, it is not clear that prayer and worship are *not* life-giving and communal practices. Thus, while Jantzen's critique of the traditional religious symbolic might hold and, hence, the practices of traditional or institutional religion undermined, it seems that Jantzen's minimal discussion of practices leaves her open, at the very least, to a critique of not having sufficiently considered them. There arises a greater issue, however: if religion is *not* simply symbolic, then (Jantzen's) original definition of religion as symbolic must be reconsidered. That Jantzen herself mentions religious practices such as *attending church or synagogue*, and that these activities cannot be subsumed under the notion of religion as *symbolic*, reveals the inadequacy of Jantzen's definition. While religion as symbolic has merit, it seems that religion cannot be reduced to this abstract, psychologized account.

Interlude

In the previous section, I discussed the work of Grace Jantzen, a contemporary philosopher of religion who attempts to mobilize the latent power of religion, as symbolic, for moral purposes, i.e. feminism.[27] While agreeing, of course, with her dissatisfaction with any religion that is detached from morality, I have nonetheless argued that her project remains unconvincing. I have found Jantzen's understanding of religion to be inadequate, particularly given the kind of ethic she is endorsing: an ethic which places a high premium on the 'other' and on human finitude.[28] Jantzen moves rather too quickly from the traditional necrophillic symbolic of western theology to the postmodern (arguably post-religious) feminist symbolic of natality. She argues for the transition from a traditional theological worldview to a feminist religious symbolic on the basis that the kind of morality spawned by traditional conceptions of religion is inadequate and even debilitating. 'Epistemological' philosophy of religion leads to an ethic which privileges the subject, who Jantzen asserts, is typically the male ego[29] ("patriarchal necrophilia"); feminist or 'postmodern' philosophy of religion, in contrast, promotes an ethic which focuses on the other ("feminist natality"). As Jantzen pursues this moral ideal of making a place for otherness, however, she fails to recognize the problematic character of human power and this, in conjunction

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[27] I understand feminism to be essentially a moral endeavour.

[28] BD, 154-155, 212-218, 229-231, 243-245

[29] While this critique of subject-centeredness seems to throw Jantzen's aforementioned affinity with Nietzsche into question, it does not. It only proves Jantzen's confusion over the 'value' of subjectivity. On the one hand, she seeks to gain subjectivity for women and she relies to a certain extent on Nietzschean/Feuerbachian precepts to do so. On the other hand, she problematizes subjectivity in reference to traditional epistemology and ethics. Of course, one can predict that Jantzen will immediately state that there is no contradiction, since female subjectivity and male subjectivity are two entirely different cases. One *should be* problematized and the other *should be* valourized. Yet, it is this very approach to selfhood – as something to be achieved by one's own striving – that will later be called into question as we focus on Jantzen's attempt to achieve an other-centered ethics.

with her endorsement of a projection theory of God, seems to preserve much of the conceptual framework that legitimizes egoism and de-emphasizes otherness -- the very problems that a feminist religious symbolic is supposed to address. The language of *symbolic* seems only to perpetuate the postmodern trend of refiguring the real as virtual, thus opening up more 'creative' space for the free exercise of human will and desire-fulfillment. Though Jantzen seeks to *curb* the prominence of the ego in philosophy of religion and ethics, her approach to the problem is itself one that *expands* the domain of ego rather than the contrary.

Thus, I have argued that a discussion of religion at the level of symbolic is an incomplete interpretation of religion and that a consideration of religion as a body of practices, and beliefs that can only be understood in terms of certain practices (and "forms of life"), is a necessary supplement. While Jantzen is right to criticize the philosophers of religion who seem so concerned with the truth-value of beliefs that they do not consider the integrity of their philosophy i.e. they give proportionally less attention to the situation of suffering and the oppression of others (ethics), Jantzen *overlooks* the possibility that *traditional religion*, in its practices and doctrines, could nonetheless be an antidote to the egocentricity of philosophers of religion and ethics that she seeks. Jantzen seems only to have considered the "powerless pietism"[30] and self-preserving varieties of traditional faith[31], which are not its strongest exemplars, and subsequently decided that salvaging the meaning of religion is only possible through the sort of postmodern turn which

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[30] Recall Jantzen's reproach of religious practice, in support of Levinas on this matter.

[31] Yes, it is true that religion, like most traditions, is mired in sexism. This is a serious issue. Nonetheless, to see traditional religion through the lens of sexism alone is, I think, to mistake the 'encasing' of religion with the 'substance' of religion, or the essential with the non-essential. To then reject traditional religion altogether is, I believe, to miss the profundity of that reality and its potential to redeem human relations.

she advocates. Even among the traditionally religious, however, faith that is segregated from moral (i.e. this-worldly and other-centered) concern is deemed to be *in*authentic.

I now turn to Simone Weil, a 20th century religious thinker who, like Jantzen, was deeply concerned with the suffering and injustice of *this* world and, in particular, the egoism pervasive in all human practices. The choice of Grace Jantzen and Simone Weil for this exploration is not arbitrary. Both Jantzen and Weil are thinkers who hold that there is no necessary tension between religion and ethics; moreover, both labour over the problem posed by the ego in ethics. Yet, they each attempt to establish a unity between the two in substantially different fashions. One of the challenges facing this juxtaposition of thinkers is that Jantzen and Weil are vastly different thinkers: whereas Jantzen is a philosopher *of religion*, Weil is a *religious* thinker. Jantzen provides an account of what religion is and can be; Weil begins with a religious experience and develops her ideas therefrom. The difference is significant, since it influences the kind of exegesis and engagement that is possible with each. With Jantzen, it is possible to give an account of her explicit view of religion; to rest at Weil's explicit view of religious practices, however, would be to miss the depth of her contribution to philosophy. Weil's writing is personal, and it is therefore revealing of who she was. There is little or no disjunction between Weil's life and thought because she herself made no such distinction. I am thus interested in elucidating the unity between spirituality and morality that permeates Weil's thought and that defined Weil as a person since her life is itself an example of the way in which a religious disposition shapes moral response.

The main difference between Jantzen and Weil is that while Jantzen understands the redemptive possibility of religion to lie in its symbolic character, Weil believes that religion is transformative only insofar as it is a means (that is, as a body of practices founded on attention or looking) by which we are brought into contact with the grace of God. Jantzen believes that the religious symbolic itself is salvific since it can be refigured as natality and thus secure the moral end of affirming 'others,' including the preeminent other, the feminine. For Weil, it is *God* who actually redeems; it is *grace* that triumphs, ultimately, over egoism, rather than our own moral imagination. In other words, Weil understands the transforming character of religion in existential rather than conceptual terms. Weil herself was a deeply religious person who was actively concerned with the social and political issues of her time. Iris Murdoch, a philosopher who has sought to bring out the significance of Weil's work for ethics, says "To think of Weil is to be reminded of a standard." If this is the case, if Weil's argument is one by example, then how are we to interpret Weil's understanding of the relationship between religious existence and responsibility? Part Two shall be devoted to expounding Weil's other-centered ethic of attention, its relation to her religious worldview, and finally, her thoughts on religious practices in particular.

PART TWO

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was a philosopher, mystic and social activist who attempted to demonstrate the inseparability of the sacred from the social and moral order. While Weil was neither a philosopher of religion nor an ethicist, she provides a religious vision that is shot through with moral concern. Her religious writings toward the end of her life focus on the need to attend to or 'wait on God' for the moral transfiguration of the world. This, however, is far from an endorsement for indifferentism in the face of the social and political turmoil of the world. The aim of this chapter is to show how Weil understands a religious posture to be one and the same as moral engagement in the fullest sense. I will focus on her distinction between willful activity and attentiveness and subsequently show how the latter, which she takes to be true participation in 'the good life,' is related to her endorsement of religious practices.

Revisiting Egoism in Ethics

It is illuminating to compare Jantzen's comment, cited in the first chapter:

> Of course it is important whether I am good or bad, but surely it is obvious that the fastest way to get things comprehensively wrong in this respect is to be focused on my own moral status rather than on the well-being and flourishing of others, acting with an eye to my own righteousness rather than for love of the world. [32]

And Weil's statement:

> It is because the will has no power to bring about salvation that the idea of a secular morality is an absurdity. What is called morality only depends on the will in what is, so to speak, its most muscular aspect. Religion on the contrary corresponds to desire and it is desire that saves. [33]

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[32] BD, 230

[33] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 195. Henceforth, referred to as 'WG'.

What this comparison suggests to us is that Weil can be seen as someone who completes or deepens the thought begun by Jantzen. Jantzen draws a connection between egocentricity and failed morality. Weil makes the same identification; the difference is that Weil probes more deeply into the cause of such a predicament, how it is that we become "comprehensively" confused about how to be 'good.' Weil understands dependence on the will as reliance on human power, and desire for the Good (God) as signifying reliance on divine power. She arrives at the conclusion that it is our conviction that we can be self-reliant in matters of virtue and vice that leads to failed attempts to truly embody our moral ideal. According to Weil, the only antidote to 'acting with an eye to my own righteousness' is, as Jantzen correctly puts it, 'acting for love of the world.' We will later show how Weil connects acting for love of the world with religious faith or consent to the grace of God, thereby diverging significantly from Jantzen's outlook.

Since Jantzen and Weil are such disparate thinkers, it may be helpful to juxtapose their common concerns and at least ostensibly similar responses. Jantzen's attempt to rectify the problem of egoism in ethics is to suggest a new religious symbolic of natality, one that affirms all humans by virtue of their status as natals. This conceptual move prevents 'others' (namely women) from being reduced to 'objects' subservient to the dominating male ego. Weil, in contrast, does not approach egoism as a philosophical 'problem' to be solved, but sees the disorder of the social, political and moral universe as being rooted in the egoistic nature of human beings. She thus attempts to understand the connection between egoism and destructive human activity. This attempt leads her to distinguish between two general patterns of human action:

willing and waiting. Her conclusion is that willing is the sign of an active ego and that goodness is not gained by willful striving, but rather, by attention to God, whether implicit or explicit. Only when we are present to another with this sort of attentiveness are we genuinely responding to the other, which Weil takes to be the central point of ethics. Hence, Weil suggests that what is needful is a desire for God that is expressed in the posture of waiting.

Both Jantzen and Weil involve the religious in their grapplings with the human ego insidious in morality. Yet, while Jantzen operationalizes the concept of sacred as 'natality,' Weil maintains a more traditional understanding of sacred, as that which is holy because it is created and given by God. Since we are presently interested in uncovering Weil's narrative of how a religious vision can transform morality, we shall here examine Weil's notion of the sacredness of a human being:

> At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, 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 man.

According to Weil, the unrequited and hopeful expectation of good in the face of evil is what constitutes the sacred in man. Faith in the ultimate goodness of reality is what compels us to respect and refrain from doing violence to another human being. The element of each human being that is devoid of ego, and drawn to God, is what Weil names 'sacred.' Since Weil understands human obligation to be directly related to human nature, the *sacredness* of human nature in particular, she names *attention* as the ultimate moral act, for attention is simply the

recognition of the sacredness of another. When one attends to another, looks and listens to another, it is not out of awareness or pursuit of one's own goodness, but because the sacredness of the other holds us still. An ethic of attention is thus Weil's rejoinder to egoism in ethics. It is *possible* that there exists a moral response which is non-egoistic. This ethic is clearly rooted in faith and a religious vision of the world for Weil describes attention as 'a miracle' and oftentimes likens it to 'a sacrament'. Hence, her language reveals an understanding of the 'looking' of faith and the 'looking of ethical attention[34] as being deeply consonant with one another. However, before turning to the ethic of attention, given that Weil's religious ethic of attention is defined to a large extent in contradistinction from what she takes to be 'natural' human moral activity, it is necessary to first examine what Weil understands by the latter, namely, by activity of the will.

The Finitude of the Will

Weil has a strong critique of the will. The substance of this critique is that the will is unable to release us from the "burden of our egos," since it is the very vehicle for egoistic activity. Weil characterizes the activity of the will as "muscular" effort and claims that this sort of effort, while necessary for some tasks, is inadequate when applied to our dealing with others. For example, muscular effort of the will is useful if one is attempting to push an object across the table with one's hand; but the same effort of the will is futile in activities such as understanding poetry, empathizing with someone's grief, or cultivating inner peace. These ends, which are

[34] attention = implicit or explicit love of God

spiritual ends, cannot be attained by the 'muscular' exertion of the will. These ends are possible only through attention to the other and, at least implicitly and ultimately, to the transcendent God, the source of grace (the significance of God is, of course, a profound component of Weil's thought, but discussion of this must be deferred for the moment).[35]

In *Waiting for God*, Weil further indicates the futility of 'rising' by the will alone by relating two parables concerning the 'rising movement.' 'Rising' is a metaphorical way of speaking of spiritual growth or maturation. First, Weil speaks of a human being who, jumping continually, thinks that eventually, he or she will jump high enough so as to stay in heaven. Yet, as Weil notes, "it is not in *our* power to move in the vertical direction."[36] We do not move closer to the Good by our willful striving. In a similar vein, Weil recounts the Brothers Grimm story of the strength competition in which a little tailor outdoes a giant. The giant throws a huge boulder into the air, and it takes a long time to fall to the ground again. The little tailor then steps up, opens his hand, and releases a bird. The bird does not come down at all. Weil concludes this story by saying, "Anything without wings always comes down again in the end."[37] Weil's point, with these stories, is to show that we cannot 'rise' by our own will, our own effort. According to Weil, we can rise only by grace; grace is that which descends on us, and lifts us up, as if we had wings and it were a wind. Grace is not gained by our efforts but is, rather, a free gift.

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[35] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 105. Henceforth, referred to as 'GG'.
[36] WG, 192
[37] WG, 195

Yet, despite her emphasis on the importance of grace, Weil does not deny that willing is an inevitable *part* of the life of faith:

> The will is on the level of the natural part of the soul. The right use of the will is a condition of salvation, necessary no doubt but remote, inferior, very subordinate and purely negative. The weeds are pulled up by the muscular effort of the peasant, but only sun and water can make the corn grow. The will cannot produce any good in the soul. [38]

Weil's point is that the will has only a limited capacity in matters of the spirit and that the true activity of faith is waiting.[39] The ego cannot transcend itself through its own unaided efforts; what is required is an attitude which both recognizes this fact and allows that recognition to yield to the ground out of which self-transcendence can develop (we will later discuss Weil's notion of decreation or "unselfing," which is an act of grace). Though it seems that Weil is expounding a spiritual journey and not a moral one (in the conventional philosophical sense of the term 'moral') it can easily be seen that the penchant to rely on human will and the false power of the ego has significant bearing on moral life, apart from any consideration of the religious, as well. Ego-driven moral activity, however well-intended, is not merely unhelpful; it actively counters the possibilities which it seeks, and may thus, even on its own grounds, be described as wrong. Hence, since

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[38] WG, 193

[39] Weil acknowledges that in the moment of spiritual trial, in the moment of affliction, when we are inclined to turn away, it is precisely the *will* that allows us to be faithful. Although in times of spiritual health, the longing for God is the simple act of attention, of waiting; when we are suffering deeply, in order to maintain our gaze on God, we must impose our will over our *inclinations*, which are under the sovereignty of gravity. Thus, to *turn* our gaze from sin to purity is an act of the *will* and not of simple attention. Although we must attend to the good rather than pursue it, there are times when we must willfully shift our gaze *in order to attend* to the right thing. Hence, the only productive activity of the will is *negative* activity; the will itself cannot *do* anything in the way of virtue. Its role is only required when attention wavers; then will is necessary to redirect attention; to "pull out the weeds" so as to be "nourished by water and light." Will is penultimate; waiting is the ultimate human gesture.

egoism is a problem for ethics and, according to Weil, egoism can only be countered by grace, the consent to grace, or religious faith, nonetheless becomes relevant for ethics.

Weil associates willing with ego-centeredness since the object's reality apart from one's desire for it is not considered; there is no space for the other to 'be' his or her otherness. Will implies *determination* to achieve or gain something. Hence there are suggestions of domination or control of, rather than cooperation with, reality.[40] It is therefore a false way of being, since it requires defining, rather than responding to, the moral universe in which we find ourselves; in attempting to control reality, we attempt as well to create it, to take on the role of the divine. This orientation to the world places ontological priority on the self and sees all others as mere things to be used as the *self* sees fit.

In contrast, Weil's notion of 'just' or 'right' activity contains an implicit awareness of *human finitude*. There is a modal difference, one could say, between wanting, which Weil espouses, and willing, to which Weil is opposed.[41] In the case of wanting, acts are understood in light of hope: though one may want something, it does not mean that one will get it. If one's moral response originates from *desire* and not will, this means that one is open to the possibility that one will not get what one wants. Weil, in line with Plato, believes that we can only *desire* the Good; if we understand it properly, we recognize that we cannot appropriate or determine it

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[40] This -- at the cognitive level – would be an example of intelligence not informed by love (i.e. without faith and grace) – for love (kenosis) abandons the desire to dominate and control. There are two forms of knowing: a controlling, objectifying, reckoning, dominating kind and a beholding, revering, attending, appreciating sort.

[41] I owe this elegant way of illustrating Weil's distinction between attentive, desirous activity and willful activity (i.e. 'wanting' vs. 'willing') to Peta Bowden, who wrote an article which will later be discussed, "Ethical Attention: Accumulated Understandings."

comprehensively and, in the same vein, when we consent to grace, we consent to the reality that outcomes are not entirely within our control; that it is not wholly "up to us."

It is Weil's understanding that *only* the supernatural virtue of love allows one to see differently, to recognize the reality of all others and thereby to transform those who have been reduced to "things," by social perceptions, back to persons (through love). This is especially obvious when considerations of charity, as conventionally understood, are taken into account:

> It is not surprising that a man who has bread should give a piece to someone who is starving. What is surprising is that he should be capable of doing so with so different a gesture from which we buy an object. Almsgiving when it is not supernatural is sort of like a purchase. It buys the sufferer. [42]

> God is not present, even if we invoke him, where the afflicted are merely regarded as an occasion for doing good. They may even be loved on this account, but then they are in their natural role, the role of matter and of things. We have to bring to them in their inert, anonymous condition a personal love. [43]

According to Weil, the assertion of the will changes, in fact, *nullifies* a moral act. This is because an active will, even in attempting to do good, necessarily overrides the existence of the other, or further corroborates the *non-existence* of the other. The good deed is a reflection on the *self* and the other, though putatively at the heart of the act, is simply a means to self-enhancement. Hence, Weil believes that the only just or moral act is love, insofar as love is *consent* to the reality of another in conjunction with a desire for the Good. Any act of will, even one that is claimed to

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[42] *WG*, 147
[43] Ibid., 150

be 'for the good of' or 'for the sake of' the other, is insufficient because it is an assertion of the ego rather than a response to the other. These acts are, in fact, unjust and immoral.

Charity is already inextricably intertwined with the religious; I will examine this relation more closely later, but here I want to concentrate on the problematic nature of the will in the structure of Weil's discussion of responsibility. In *Waiting for God*, Weil begins her reflection on love of the neighbor with the question, "Who but Christ himself can be Christ's benefactor?" [44] Weil indicates, by this question, that giving or charity (she uses these words interchangeably) is not an act of the self, but an act of Christ through the self. This is because, as Weil understands it, *we* cannot give to the one who is, by definition, *the* gift of life. Christ is the lived expression of charity as he gives *himself* up for the sake of all others. In presenting Christ as the exemplar of charity, Weil asserts that acts of goodness cannot be appropriated by or attributed to us. When we are charitable, we are simply participating in goodness; it does not originate with us. *Goodness is something that is outside of us.* Again, Weil affirms the reality of grace, a reality to which I will soon turn.

Moreover, Weil points out that this law of Christ's to be charitable, to give bread to the other, to give one's life to the neighbor, is not considered 'charity,' as *we* understand it, by Christ. In the eyes of Christ, charity is not praiseworthy or laudable. It is simply necessary. It is realism. Weil states, "Christ calls his benefactors just." [45] Weil proceeds to distinguish between *two* standards of moral action, one in which giving is not considered necessary and thus is praised

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[44] WG, 139
[45] Ibid.

(natural justice), and another in which charity is necessary and thus, is not praised, but, rather, demanded (Christian justice).

> We have invented the distinction between justice and charity. It is easy to understand why. Our notion of justice dispenses him who possesses from the obligation of giving. If he gives all the same, he thinks he has a right to be pleased with himself. He thinks he has done a good work. As for him who receives, it depends on the way he interprets this notion whether he is exempted from all gratitude or whether it obliges him to offer servile thanks. [46]

Weil shows how the disjunction of justice and charity is related to our infusion of praise and blame into the moral realm. Once charity ceases to be considered necessary and is reconceived as optional, acts of unowed love become opportunities for the ego of the 'giver' to be bolstered and the ego of the recipient to be either ungrateful or falsely grateful. The recipient cannot be truly grateful, as nothing has been given for which he or she can express true thanks. Giving requires that the one giving recognizes and respects the recipient of the gift; otherwise, it is pity.

> Pity goes down to a certain level, but not below it. What does charity do in order to descend lower? [47]

Here we see the force of Weil's critique of egocentric ethics quite clearly. The gift that produces a feeling of self-satisfaction in the benefactor is tainted by the implicit understanding that there is an inequality between the two parties. This sort of giving only establishes the giver further in his or her own power, in his superiority. Giving thus becomes the partner of egoism (and inequality),

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[46] WG, 140

[47] GG, 4. It is important to emphasize this distinction in light of the well-known critique of pity and Christian morality by Nietzsche.

rather than equality. There is no gift in the act of giving which is conceived under the paradigm of justice on one side and charity on the other since where justice apart from charity is considered acceptable, charity is understood as excessive. The one who is 'charitable' is therefore entitled to praise and, thus, by his 'gift', he is built up rather than depleted. According to Weil, there is no true giving. The one who possesses more has given *nothing* to the one who has less. Hence, the disunity of justice and charity allows for egoism to creep into the moral order and praise and blame are the symptoms of this contamination.

An Ethic of Attention

Yet, though the aforementioned model of giving is prevalent, i.e., though justice is typically 'natural', there is, on occasion, the revelation of another kind of justice in our midst, one which Weil calls 'supernatural.' Weil's understands *attention* to be the embodiment of *supernatural* justice and *genuine* moral response. Many have expounded this aspect of Weil's thought, using her work as an exemplar of what is known in contemporary ethics as the 'ethic of attention.' While much has been made of the ethical significance of Weilian attention, typically, the intrinsic religiosity of this ethic has been downplayed, [48] perhaps because of the secular nature of modern ethical theory in general. In the present account of Weil's notion of attention, I hope to demonstrate that in order to truly understand the distinctiveness of Weil's (moral) concept of attention, the religious vision in which this ethic is rooted must be brought to the foreground.

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[48] See "Seeing Through Women's Eyes: The Role of Vision in Women's Moral Theory" in Eva Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin, eds., Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 111-116.

"Attention" is, without doubt, one of Weil's uniquely preferred words. What does she mean by it? There are at least four related concepts that are fundamental aspects of Weil's notion of attention: "impersonal looking," "consent," "restraint," and "passive activity." Attention is, first of all, a particular orientation to a thing; it is a kind of looking that neither intrudes on the object being attended nor is indifferent to it. It is an engagement that looks without seeking to reduce that which is attended to a thing whose meaning is gauged by its relation to the attending party; instead, it is motivated by a desire to see the object truly, in its full reality. According to Weil, attention is an impersonal looking in that it is not driven by egoistic desires or attachments. The kind of looking which characterizes attention is akin to beholding, as opposed to a seeking that is ultimately rooted in self-interest.

To further illustrate the kind of looking that characterizes attention Weil refers to the story of two birds in the Upanishads. She recounts: "Two birds are on the branch of a tree. One eats the fruit, the other looks at it." Weil concludes that all acts of crime and sin can be said to be derived from the human desire to eat what should only be looked at. [49] Attention, in distinction from activity of the will, wants nothing of the other but that the other *be* in its full reality. Attention is an act of love. According to Weil, love does not manifest itself in anything but a looking; a looking that sees the life, the reality, the singular dignity in the object of attention. Attention is

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[49] WG, 166

love insofar as it does not demand of the object of attention anything for itself; on the contrary, attention implies self-restraint[50], it is thus the epitome of other-centered moral response.

Moreover, by this looking, one actualizes the reality of the one being attended, since what is needed for human freedom is the recognition of a will, and one whose will has been denied is thereby rendered little more than a thing, a "piece of inert matter" as Weil puts it. Only attention can bring out the faculty of consent that is hidden in such a weakened, *demoralized* individual. It is important to note that the will, however, is only the pre-condition of freedom; it is not ultimately the ground of true freedom. According to Weil, true freedom arises in the moment that one *renounces* the will and consents to a higher freedom, the freedom of love or attention. Attention is a more liberated attitude than willing because in the latter case, the world is reduced to the self, its preoccupations and unfulfilled desires.

Yet one must first be aware that one has a will in order to renounce it. While the higher freedom of love is the freedom to consent (to reality, which entails renunciation of one's will) rather than to control (that is, simply to will), love is only possible if one consciously renounces one's own will. The ultimate aim of attention is thus to give birth to the faculty of *free consent*, that is, to the *renunciation* of the will, in another. One who is oppressed easily loses his or her will to power, but he or she is also prone to losing his or her desire for true freedom, the desire for non-violent love. Hence, it is the moral responsibility of one in whom the faculty of consent has not been (as) eroded to look and to listen, to show the other that his or her consent matters.

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[50] GG, 136

Attention implies acknowledgment of a will; this ultimately allows the other to consent to something higher than will, that is, love. In other words, attention or love is as proliferating as the use of force. Moreover, attention does not liberate solely the person to whom attention is paid. Simultaneously, the person attending is actualized or freed since through attending one is released from preoccupation with oneself.

This transformative power of attention is something that Weil explicitly notes, as she speaks of *creative* attention. Weil uses the term "creative attention" [51]to describe what takes place in the story of the Good Samaritan. This qualification of the term implies that attention is a form of perception that has life-giving properties. There is a slight ambiguity in what Weil means by attention, insofar as attention appears to mean both *seeing the life that is already present* in another (perception), as well as *bringing life* to another (creation):

> He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings, of which fate had deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them. [52]

> Creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying inert by the roadside. The Samaritan who stops and looks gives his attention all the same to this absent humanity, and the actions which follow prove that it is a question of real attention. [53]

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[51] WG, 144, 147, 148, 149
[52] WG, 144
[53] WG, 149

In other words, it seems that attention involves both recognition and imagination and that these aspects relate in attention as the kind of perception that recognizes what is not easily perceived (i.e. the sacredness of the person), and which is, by virtue of this, itself creative.

Finally, attention is not to be confused with absolute passivity. Although attention or waiting is seemingly effortless and is clearly not active in any aggressive sense of the word, it is nonetheless activity and, moreover, according to Weil, it is the most difficult thing to do. It is difficult because of our tendency to act on will rather than in the absence of will and willful desire. Weil states, "the will is not afraid of fatigue, but rather, death." [54] Waiting, then, is the opposite of moral inertia since it requires us to destroy our egos, which is true work, since we are so naturally moved to action by the egoistic will.

I would like now to consider one of ways in which Weil's 'ethic of attention' is typically portrayed. In an article dealing exclusively with the topic of ethical attention, "Ethical Attention: Accumulating Understandings," [55] Peta Bowden introduces the central concept as "a perceptive-epistemological dimension of ethics; a cognitive disposition that is connected with the possibilities and limits of our ethical responsiveness to the world and the persons who people it." Bowden states explicitly that she understands ethical attention as a "cognitive capacity." At the outset, Bowden attempts to situate attention within the landscape of modern philosophy, noting that empiricists and idealists alike have previously considered attention, though only as a neutral

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[54] WG, 194

[55] Bowden, "Ethical Understandings: Accumulating Understandings." *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1998): 59-77.

cognitive act or state, which Bowden claims is overly simplistic. She states that she wishes to elucidate the complexity of attention understood as a moral concept, and to bring out the variability and indeterminacy that characterize moral relations between existing, complicated human beings. Weil is one of the "theorists" Bowden uses in her attempt to illuminate ethical attention. She also discusses Iris Murdoch, who has drawn from Weil substantially, and Martha Nussbaum, who brings an Aristotelian emphasis to ethics and, particularly, the ethic of attention. All three thinkers, Bowden states, are interested in the "ethical dimensions of a special kind of *focused perception*," "*observational orientation*," "*perceptive disposition*."

Though Bowden likely has no intention of misrepresenting any of the aforementioned thinkers – 'misrepresent' is already too strong a word – she seems from the beginning to have streamlined Weil's notion of ethical attention to fit the *epistemological* requirements of modern ethical theory. Bowden maintains throughout the article that Weilian attention is a cognitive act, speaking of it as "a very active *intellectual* practice of looking," "(mental) gymnastics," and the "outmanoeuvring" action of attention over the will. While this characterization is not entirely erroneous or unfounded, it is at least somewhat inaccurate given that Weil often uses "compassion" and "attention" interchangeably, and compassion is simply not reducible to a mere cognitive response.

Bowden's reference to "gymnastics" originates from a passage in *Gravity and Grace* in which Weil discusses school studies as a kind of training i.e. "gymnastics" of attention, such that they should be viewed as "a refraction of spiritual life" since "prayer [is] only attention in its pure

form." [56] Since Weil does discuss attention in the context of school studies, it is not unreasonable to infer that by attention she means a particular *cognitive* act. Yet, Weil also speaks of attention *in its pure form* as *prayer*, and that Weil might have a schema of *qualitatively distinct* forms of attention (i.e. intellectual attention may not be the same as compassion or prayer) seems to be a point that is continually overlooked in Weil scholarship. [57] Whereas Bowden, like many other scholars who have examined Weil's concept of attention in detail[58], emphasizes the similarity of ethical attention to intellectual attention, it seems that Weil's notion of attention as prayer has a deeper affinity to the ethical attention of compassion than does the attention involved in school study. In the aforementioned passage from *Gravity and Grace*, Weil herself explicitly states that attention is *trained* in school studies; it is not *epitomized* by the "right use of school studies."

Further evidence that Bowden is implicitly wedded to the rationalist presuppositions of ethics is her statement concerning Weil's central illustration of attention as:

> ...'consent', a capacity embedded in the complex of practical attitudes and commitments that allows activity to be *intelligible*. Consent gives attention its ethical quality, signifying a positive disposition in those who attend towards their subjects....[59].

On the one hand, Bowden's qualification of 'consent' as ethical, insofar as it implies a positive disposition in the attending person to the other, redeems the statement from being an overly rationalistic interpretation of Weil's notion of consent. On the other hand, she prefaces "consent

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[56] GG, 108
[57] Miklos Veto, author of *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, is an exception.
[58] Eg. Iris Murdoch, Charles Stewart-Robertson, Ann Pirruccello, Hilde T. Nelson, Nel Noddings, Peter Winch.
[59] Bowden, 61

gives attention its ethical quality" with a statement emphasizing the association of consent with intelligibility. Following Weil scholar Peter Winch, Bowden again reads Weil in a rationalistic light when she frames the virtue of attention as lying in the ability to " 'transport ourselves to that centre of *thought* from which the other person reads values,' resisting at all costs the temptations to impose or force our own *point of view* on others, even when we believe that point of view to be in their own best interest" (emphasis mine). The quote from Winch is a questionable interpretation of Weil, since Weil's ethical concern for the other is not rooted in the issue of ethical pluralism (reading the other person's "values"), but rather, the sacredness of the other. Attending to the other is not an attempt to establish cognitive rapport with the other, to achieve a "fusion of horizons" over values. While a case could easily be made for commonalities between hermeneutical ethics and Weil's ethic of attention, it should be noted that attention, for Weil, is, ultimately, a response to another human being's *existential* plight. Attention is an endeavour to recognize the life in another hopeful, disappointed, wounded and struggling human being, not to understand their personal ethic.

The reason why I have dwelled on this point is that I think that to "cognitivize" Weilian attention is not only misread Weil on the matter -- although admittedly she does lend herself to such a misreading -- but to diminish the radical quality of Weil's ethic. This is not a claim that Weil's notion of attention is devoid of reason; it is simply to say that the kind of knowing involved in "ethical" attention is more akin to "reasons of the heart of which the mind knows not" than intellectual cognizing. As distinguished Weil scholar, the late Rush Rhees puts it, "Weil does not

try to show the reasonableness of consent." [60] Given the mysticism underpinning Weil's religious writings, in which her concept of attention is most developed, it seems that scholars who depict Weil's notion of attention as a marriage of reason and *love* or justice and compassion give a more accurate portrayal of Weil's thought. Bowden herself recognizes the distinctly anti-rationalistic (though again, not irrational) character of Weil's philosophizing:

> She [Weil] gives few arguments or discursive explanations for her remarks and it seems that '[h]er observations often strike her as just too plain to require argument.' The dangers of an approach that eschews justifications in a context that values rigorous analyses are clear, but this is precisely Weil's point. Her practice denies absolutely the relevance of bringing external, human forms to bear on the objects of attention. [61]

Again,

> Against a tradition that identifies persons with their rational natures, she pits a sense of personhood constituted in the face of vulnerability to affliction and holding the potential goodness of participating in the revelation of truth against ever harmful forces. [62]

Weil's unique contribution to moral philosophy is that she refuses to reduce the person to a bundle of *conceptions*; attention is her way of demurring from any ethic of human *personality*. Weil would likely protest vehemently against the idea that what is worthy of respect in another human being is his or her "values." "Values" smacks too much of personality, and, personality, for Weil, is too conceptually proximate to ego.

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[60] Rhees, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, 93.
[61] Bowden, 60
[62] Ibid, 61

Ann Pirruccello is another scholar who interprets Weil's ethic along cognitive lines and subsequently critiques Weil for providing an overly conceptual and abstract account of moral experience. She goes as far as to charge Weil with attempting to create a science of morality, a moral psychology. It seems, however, that Pirrucello is drawing on the scientific pieces of Weil's published body of works to make this argument, presented in her article, " 'Gravity' in the Thought of Simone Weil." [63] Yet, in another article, "Interpreting Simone Weil: Presence and Absence in Attention," Pirruccello seems to recognize the deeply spiritual character of Weilian attention. In this latter article, Pirruccello compares Weil's notion of the absence of any determinate object in attention, namely the sensible absence of God in waiting, with the notion of pure faith as objectless faith, in Japanese philosopher Hase Shōtō's work. This spiritual reading of Weil's concept of attention seems to yield a more accurate depiction of attention, in that it associates the impersonal, non-attached, non-egoistic character of attention with the indeterminacy of waiting in faith rather than the determinate and indifferent character of scientific principles. Again, Weil identifies attention with compassion and prayer, thus indicating the passion, rather than the lack thereof, of this ethic.

Notwithstanding, it is generally widely recognized that the primary significance of Weil's ethic of attention is that it brings out the need to overcome the self that interferes with genuine moral response. Yet, scholarly work on Weil's ethic of attention usually terminates in a discussion of *what* this attention is; less often is it asked *how* ethical attention can be made

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[63] Pirruccello, " 'Gravity' in the thought of Simone Weil." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57, no.1 (1997): 73-93.

possible. This, I believe, is related to the neglect of the religious underpinnings of attention. I hope to show that by bringing Weil's religious vision to bear on attention, her radical redefinition of moral theory will be more readily apparent.

To recapitulate, the distinction between an ethic of will and an ethic of attention is the following: Weil sees willful activity as an exertion of the self; as such, it inevitably violates the object of the will, whether greatly or minimally. This is because an act of will renders another live being a thing: to be controlled, to be used. It violates the principle of freedom and reality in that being. Insofar as love is the complete opposite of such violence – and it is important that this violence be recognized as violence to the *true* self, not the self that is itself rooted in violence and domination – love cannot be an act of will in any way. Love can only be attention. Attention, contrary to the will, sees the reality in what appears to be a thing and thereby transforms the unreal into the real. Will transforms the real into the unreal.[64] According to Weil, attention is the only antidote to this degradation. Moreover, attention is the true substance of moral activity. Hence, the question at hand becomes: how to move from an ethic premised on the power and possibilities of the will to an ethic of attention?

The Need for Decreation

Given the foregoing, it should be no surprise that Weil speaks continually of the decreation of the self. According to Weil, we must decreate the self since it is naturally egoistic and thus false; the ego (embodiment of false power) is what is responsible for the disorder of the

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[64] Eaton, "Simone Weil and Feminist Spirituality." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54, no.4 (Winter 1986): 698.

world. Some find this aspect of her thought problematic[65], as decreation seems akin to self-hatred, the dangers of which we are all too aware, since the 'liberated' ethos of modernity and the coming to consciousness of man have assumed cultural dominance. Yet, decreation is, in fact, a positive doctrine, because to decreate the disorder (evil, falseness) of the world is to negate the negative: it is the counterpart of increasing order or goodness in the world. Decreation is the condition for the actuality of a loving order in the world; or, more precisely, a compassionate reality requires that all egos first be destroyed.

In other words, Weil understands compassion to be a way of life that necessarily involves death. This death is not an unwelcome death, however: it is an end for the ego or the false self, only. Weil highlights continually, though often implicitly, the idea that that we live in falsity. "What is generally named egoism is not love of self, it is a defect of perspective." [66] Hence, the death that allows for compassion is not to be mourned but in fact desired for it is the death of a life of utter self-reliance and subsequent self-imposed isolation; of a life in darkness, of a life without knowledge that there is a source of moral energy that enables one to live lovingly with others, if we allow it to transform us. Compassion, according to Weil, is a *miracle.* It is a natural impossibility. Weil knows that in the natural order of things, a dynamic of power pervades ethics and to treat another who seems to be inferior to oneself as an equal – to stand under an 'other' so as "to make [him or her] a gift of the quality of human beings" – is tantamount to a sort of killing of oneself, since it is a strike to the ego.

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[66] Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Greeks*, 133

> Whatever a man may want, in cases of crime as in those of highest virtue, in the minutest preoccupations as in the greatest designs, the essence of his desire always consists in this, that he wants above all things to be able to exercise his will freely. To wish for the existence of this free consent in another, deprived of it by affliction, is to transport oneself into him; it is to consent to affliction oneself, that is to say, *the destruction of oneself*.... (emphasis mine) [67]

Compassion is not simply interest in another; it is absolute concern for the other. It demands of us to share in the burden and affliction of someone else simply for the sake of giving strength to another:

> In denying oneself, one becomes capable under God of establishing someone else by creative affirmation. One gives oneself in ransom for the other. It is a redemptive act. [68]

For the one who is strong, or has power, and who does not see the *necessity* of this 'gift' of life, this act is not only incomprehensible, it is impossible. [69] For gift only makes sense by the logic of love and the egocentric moral subject ultimately abides by the logic of force, which is completely antithetical to love. According to Weil, it is not the ego, the 'natural' part of the soul that has the capacity to give, but the supernatural, non-egoistic part of the soul.

Herein lies the complexity of the matter: the decentering attitude of attention cannot be achieved through an effort of the human will alone. Weil believes that we need something *beyond* purely human capabilities to truly love another since the kind of other-centeredness that characterizes loving attention involves a sort of self-immolation. What ego would consent to his

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[67] WG, 147
[68] WG, 147-148
[69] WG 120

or her destruction? An ego is, by definition, bound up with power and *personal* power, in particular. Moreover, any attempt to terminate the power of the ego through willful effort is only another attempt by the ego at self-sufficiency. Hence, according to Weil, it is only by consenting to the supernatural energy of grace, or only through letting genuine love engulf the self, that love is transformed from threat to joy. In other words, we can only love with true compassion if we first ask for and receive grace, the grace that decreates our false selves and celebrates in an embodied way (i.e. in acts of attention to the afflicted and oppressed) the true selfhood of all.

However, without our *consent*, grace does not take us up and we are not able to "come down without weight." [70] It is Weil's belief that God so loved the world that he renounced his own power, so that we may *freely* choose to love him. Consent is a sort of act. This indicates that decreation is not identical to self-annihilation since only a self can act; only a self can consent. True, the consent to grace entails renunciation: Weil emphasizes the importance of renunciation of all desires, - even the desire to be good - so that a void opens up in oneself, which God can then come and fill. Perhaps a better way of understanding decreation would be *welcome*. We must be open to and hospitable to grace, or else the divine power will not descend. We must *let* ourselves be moved by grace, rather than gravity, if we wish to support rather than crush our neighbor. Yet, though this may sound destructive, decreation cannot be purely negative or nihilistic, especially given Weil's remarks on loving the beauty of the world. Rather, the doctrine of decreation pertains only to the reality of evil and affliction in the world:

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[70] GG, 3

> There must be absolute acceptance of the possibility that everything *natural* in us should be destroyed. But we must simultaneously accept and repudiate the possibility that the *supernatural* part of the soul should disappear. [71]

It might reasonably be wondered on what basis Weil rests all these strong claims; what is it that undergirds her rigorous other-centered ethic? Answering this question requires a close examination of two important concepts of which Weil makes much use: grace itself, and its counterpart, and opposite, gravity. To these I now turn.

Weil's Vision of Two Moral Orders: One Human, One Divine

Weil gives us a provocative picture of the world. She defines it in the language of *force*: "Two forces rule the universe: light and gravity... Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise." [72] According to Weil, our lives are lived continually in the tension between these two forces. Since they are *opposing* forces, gravity and grace can be seen as a metaphor for competing *masters* of the human *spirit.*[73] In other words, these forces represent a choice, an existential choice: which shall we obey? Whom shall we serve?

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[71] WG, 226 (emphasis mine)

[72] GG, 3

[73] Weil does not simply speak of gravity as a spiritual principle. Elsewhere, she applies the term in its classically scientific sense i.e. as a physical principle. However, in her 'religious' works, namely *Gravity and Grace* and *Waiting for God*, the two main sources for this current project, gravity *is* used a metaphor for spiritual fallenness and moral weakness. Ann Piruccello has argued that Weil attempts, with her use of the term gravity, to create a science out of morality, a moral psychology, so to speak. She then criticizes Weil for the subsequent abstractness of her discussion of morality through the use of the scientific principles of thermondynamics. This, however, is not what I understand Weil to be doing. She is not attempting to create a science of morality; her use of the scientific term 'gravity' is, rather, an attempt to elucidate the nature of morality *qua* morality. Pirrucello seems to have Weil backwards: not morality for the purpose of developing science, but science for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of morality.

The language of *obedience* is significant. It is the language of Christianity. Weil shows us, however, that obedience and service are not particular to the vernacular of Christian *faith*. She does not simply speak of obedience with respect to grace or God's love. Gravity, too, is a force, a power that can hold us in its sway, making us its slave. If we are not serving God, then we are serving something else: Weil calls it "gravity." Weil suggests that, though we may not recognize it, we are all, always, living under some principle or law. She underscores the *inevitability* of the life of servanthood:

"Two forces rule the universe: gravity and grace." [74]

"Obedience. There are two kinds. We can obey the force of gravity or we can obey the relationship of things." [75]

While it is natural to think of service in terms of one human *serving* another, or a human being *serving* God, there is also a less obvious case of "service": of *serving oneself*. This, too, is to live under a master. Thus, it is a question of whom we *consent* to serve.

There is textual evidence to suggest that Weil's notion of gravity can be interpreted as obedience to one's naturally selfish inclinations, or as Weil puts it, "natural necessity":

"What is the reason that as soon as one human being shows he needs another (no matter whether his need be slight or great) the latter draws back from him? Gravity." [76]

"Everything we call base is a phenomenon due to gravity." [77]

"Or again we praise ourselves... This is as inevitable as gravity." [78]

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[74] GG, 1
[75] Ibid., 43
[76] GG, 1
[77] Ibid.

Grace, on the other hand, can be understood as obedience to *supernatural* necessity or to God. According to Weil, grace is the driving force behind all acts of love and compassion; it is what moves a person in a state of affliction to love God through the most profound agony. It is grace at work when a human being who has the power to *dominate* another human being does not use it:

> The supernatural virtue of justice consists of behaving as though there were equality when one is stronger in an unequal relationship... He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings, of which fate has deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he [or she] reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them. [79]

It is grace, again, that makes it possible for the soul to "go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself." [80]

The *natural* law is to be self-regarding for the sake of self-preservation. Faith (the consent to grace), however, is the trust that we *are* preserved and that, therefore, we can and should live in light of the *supernatural* law of love. To love is to be other-regarding, and this is considered necessary only by a *supernatural* law, not a natural one. The natural law of self-preservation does not demand other-centeredness; on the contrary, it demands that one use all of one's power to sustain oneself. Grace, however, is the law of love, or the belief that love *is* the law. Consent to the supernatural law of grace or love is recognizing that there is a higher necessity than self-preservation. As this law is *supernatural* rather than of natural necessity, it is

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[78] GG, 9
[79] WG, 144
[80] Ibid., 121

a law that *reigns* over the law of natural necessity: "Grace is the *law* of the *descending* movement." [81] Thus, gravity or the power of force is inferior to love as a law of the human spirit.

Thus, as humans we face a spiritual dilemma that requires us to choose between, on the one hand, the force of gravity or self-love and, on the other, the force of grace or love of God. According to Weil, the love of God draws us out of ourselves; it takes us out of the illusory world in which we are at the center, to the real world in which God is at the center and all of creation is worthwhile because it is meaningful to Him.

> We live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the *center*, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence. [82]

> To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the *center* of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centers and that the true center is outside the world, this is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in 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 the neighbor; the face turned toward matter is love of the order of the world, or love of the beauty of the world, which is the same thing.[83]

Grace, then, is a *transformative* force. Not only is it a power in itself, but it is also the power that is necessary to be brought under its domain. Paradoxically, one requires grace in order to live by grace. At least, this seems to be a paradox insofar as it is thought that if living by grace is a *choice*, then there must be some position from which to choose at which one is not

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[81] GG, 4
[82] WG, 159
[83] Ibid.

governed either by gravity or by grace. The contradiction exists, however, only if one understands choice as making a commitment from a detached perspective. Weil's paradigm, however, admits of no such notion. We already live in the metaxu of the natural and the supernatural, so there is no escaping from either force, and having to "choose." We do not possess negative freedom or the power to choose absolutely anything. Rather, we must and can only choose to *consent* to one power, which does not negate the existence of either power; but, if the consent is to grace, according to Weil, it is possible to transform or gradually destroy the power of gravity, since grace is more powerful than gravity. On the other hand, if we consent to gravity, we are not, in fact, consenting to anything, since gravity is mechanistic and mechanism is impersonal; as such, mechanism requires no consent. Consent implies a metaphysical framework of *freedom* within *determinism*. In other words, consent implies that human choice exists, but that this choice is within limits. While we cannot choose between the existence and non-existence of grace, we can choose to work with this reality or against it. The very *possibility* of consent, then, implies the reality of grace. In the case of gravity, however, we cannot choose to work with reality or not. Mechanism, finally, precludes the possibility of that choice; mechanism is synonymous with thorough-going determinism. [84] Thus, there are two levels of freedom at stake: there is the freedom whereby we submit ourselves to the absolute power of gravity or the absolute power of grace; and there is the freedom that follows from living under the "master" we have chosen.

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[84] WG, 128-129

Grace is the power of love, which, as we have already said, is a *supernatural* law and therefore, a higher law than gravity or self-love. According to Weil, the principle of gravity only *masquerades* as law (in the spiritual or moral realm), insofar as neither its power nor its justice is absolute. "*Grace* is the *law* of the descending movement."[85] In other words, the relativity or limited character of the principle of gravity is revealed by a comparison with the law of grace. The respective power of each law is revealed in the kind of freedom that each makes possible. Weil does not consider the person or group of people who act according to the principle of gravity to be free; he, she, or they are merely puppets on a string, bowing down to the mechanistic force of gravity, which works in favour of the stronger and destroys the weaker.

> When, however, a man turns away from god, he simply gives himself up to the law of gravity. Then he thinks that he can decide and choose, but he is only a thing, a stone that falls... Those whom we call criminals are only tiles blown off a roof by the wind and falling at random. Their only fault is the initial choice by which they become such tiles. [86]

Gravity, in the human i.e. moral realm, is a law that serves the particular, as opposed to the universal. Insofar as it is a law for some and not a law for all, it is not sufficiently absolute. Arbitrariness can therefore insinuate itself into this "order." Egoism is the name of the "entropy" of this order. Grace is the order of necessity that trumps the order of mechanism, or, one could say, the *dis*order of mechanism, as *grace is that which transforms our egocentric disposition into one that is theocentric and thereby one that is other-centered.* According to Weil, grace *enables* us to

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[85] GG, 4
[86] WG, 128

forget ourselves and to attend to our neighbor, our friend, and the beauty of the world. This (grace or the rule of love), for Weil, is the true order of the world.

The reason that grace is named the necessary power of and for love is that, according to Weil, on our own, we (human beings) are selfish. Our natural condition is a selfish condition. All too often, our 'natural' order is one where people treat each other like things. From a distance, this type of relation looks like mechanism. There is no sense or meaning to what happens. People simply act and react to one another like objects in a force field. Thus, in order to break out of that condition, something is needed from *outside* to draw us out of our egoistic worlds. We cannot become selfless on our own. Moreover, this power is grace since, for Weil, God is the model of self-renunciating or *selfless* love. Weil's doctrine of God is interesting in that it affirms God's reality by both his presence *and* his absence in the world. Weil understands creation as the act in which God *withdrew*, in which God held back from exerting the power that he had in order to let something else, namely the world, be. Thus, grace, or the activity of God, is, by definition, selfless action or loving action. Grace is synonymous with goodness since God's withdrawing is proof that one may "forbear out of pure generosity to command where he has the power to do so." [87]

> The spectacle of the world is [another], more certain proof. Pure goodness is not anywhere to be found in it. Either God is not almighty or he is not absolutely good, or else he does not command everywhere where he has the power to do so. [88]

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[87] WG, 145
[88] Ibid.

In fact, creation is not the only act through which we experience the nature of divine love. Weil, speaking on this point from within the Christian narrative specifically, also cites the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ. By reference to these acts, God becoming man and God dying on the cross to redeem the world, Weil reveals the logic behind her association of grace and other-centered love.

Thus, an account is given of both the evil and the good in the world. Evil is inherent in the natural order and pure goodness is distinctly transcendent, *although goodness may enter the natural order through human consent to it.* This is, of course, nothing other than a classically Christian worldview. Interestingly, Weil states that the evil in the world is further *proof* of God's love for humanity, for it is a sign of his *absence*, a sign of his desire to let us be and to love him in freedom rather than out of coercion. [89] Of course, this vision of the world will be highly problematic for one who does not see reality in this way, particularly on the issue of the "fallenness" of this worldly order. One can certainly disagree with and even challenge the truth of Weil's and the Christian conception of the world. The question arises, however, over the extent to which it is possible to "argue" about a metaphysic and worldview.

Notwithstanding, the fact that Weil claims that there are *two* orders is important. Without this distinction of two ontological orders, it is possible to mistake *what is lawful* with *what is considered lawful* (what certain powerful groups have *deemed* to be lawful).[90] If we simply assert

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[89] Ibid.

[90] It is important not to confuse this point with the naturalistic fallacy, which is not what Weil is getting at. The difference between the naturalistic fallacy, which distinguishes between what is and what ought to be,

that there is only one order and that it is the order of natural justice (Weil's definition of it) this, in effect, legitimizes tyranny as 'natural justice' is an order whereby the law of the stronger passes for the law of all; where ego expansion is allowed and even praised as just. Weil seeks to challenge the tyranny of custom or human habit. She argues that despite the fact that human existence seems to demonstrate that lived reality is not impartial or just, that the weak are often oppressed by those who have power, nevertheless, true justice is real. To claim that there are two orders and that one is an order where the stronger does not crush the weaker but *gives* to the weaker, and that this latter order constitutes *true* justice, precludes the possibility of tyranny having any legitimacy as a normative force.

Hence, we must make a choice between gravity and grace, between true order and false order. According to Weil, to allow gravity to rule *absolutely*, that is, to allow it to govern the spiritual and, hence, moral realm is to consent to our own enslavement. While gravity is a law whose supremacy is unproblematic in the natural or physical realm, in the spiritual or moral realm, gravity runs up against itself, since this law allows for egoism and the latter is inconsistent with virtue and goodness. Gravity or mechanistic power is inadequate as a moral law, since its 'logic' (the logic of power as force) precludes the recognition of the humanity that is present in each and all of us. Gravity is the force that allows the stronger to exert power over the weaker. Thus, it is an order that supports and legitimizes the authority of human egos at the expense of human *beings*. Weil favours the alternative power of grace or love, as *absolute* power, since she

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and Weil's distinction, is that Weil's supernatural order is not theoretical or hypothetical, but precisely the truly real, *already actual* goodness.

understands grace as that which takes us out of the egocentric predicament and thereby allows for the human flourishing of all.

Love of God or Consent to Grace: The Ground of Attention

Hence, it is obvious that Weil forges a deep connection between the moral act of attending to a fellow human being and the religious act of waiting for God. Weil's claim is that looking with desire to God, who is the model of self-renunciating love, is how we come to forget ourselves, that is, become less egoistic, and to pay attention to the other. On Weil's account, *grace* is what decenters and recenters a naturally egoistic self, which implies that the moral response of attending, an other-centered ethic, cannot be *attributed* to the 'moral subject', meaning that this ethic is thoroughly non-egoistic since there is no point at which the primacy of the other and the finite character of the self wavers or shifts. Praise and blame, which as we have indicated earlier are but mere symptoms of the implicitly egoistic nature of modern, secular ethics, do not make an appearance in this religiously grounded ethic of attention.

What follows from Weil's depiction of the world in terms of two spiritual and moral orders is that we are made to see that self-love and self-giving love are two distinct and competing 'logics'. We can see that Weil's ethic of attention, which presents looking and listening to another human being as the preeminent moral act, is integrally linked with her conception of grace or love, which is a supernatural power; that attention, and all acts of attention, are the activity of grace. Conversely, it is clear that when we act out of will, we are held by the false power of our egos, which are attuned to the power of force or "gravity". In other words, Weil's religious vision

gives us the possibility of understanding why any form of egoism seems incongruous with virtue and why attention seems to be such a radically different moral response.

Her discussion of the spiritual is so deeply intertwined with her discussion of human moral response that it is impossible to discern her moral philosophy without encountering her understanding of God. Here, we attempt to uncover this connection in greater detail. We attempt to make explicit the emphasis that Weil places on the *incarnate* (or, *embodied*) character of the supernatural. It has been said that Weil provokes us to realize a "divine humanity."[91] Certainly, it is clear that her absorption with the divine was rooted in the incarnational possibility of love. Though presently an aside, it is interesting to note the difference between Weil's understanding of a "divine humanity" and Jantzen's. Upon clarifying the way in which the supernatural works in Weil's thought to bring about a redeemed reality, we shall later explore this contrast.

According to Weil, grace makes it possible for one human being not to crush another human being through the use of force. Grace allows one to "come down without weight." Weil understands 'grace' as 'moral energy'[92]: it is fuel for our acts of love in the world. God's love in us carries us to the point at which we offer ourselves to our neighbors as a means to their full humanity. Clearly Weil does not understand grace as a force that operates outside of the world, but one that moves into the world and manifests itself in the human activity in the world. Grace is present in redeemed social relations, relations between *humans*, rather than blind, physical objects. Hence, Weil's characterization of God is not as a Being who lifts us up and *out* of this

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[91] See *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture" Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*, (ed.) R. Bell.
[92] GG, 1-3, 6-8,

world, but one who returns our gaze, with greater intensity, to the world we live in here and now. In other words, living in this world with a view toward eternity enhances our time *in time*. Weil believes that through looking up, God turns our gaze downward:

> To come down in a movement in which gravity plays no part... Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: What wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight? [93]

> Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace, and *the descending movement of the second degree of grace*. [94]

> Pure love of creatures is not love *in* God, but love which has passed *through* God as through fire. Love which detaches itself completely from creatures to ascend to God, and *comes down again* associated with the creative love of God. Thus the two opposites which rend human love are united: to love the beloved being just as he is, and to want to re-create him.[95]

"The descending movement of the second degree of grace" *is* the act of attending: the movement of servanthood that Christ made in order to redeem creation, the movement we make when we show compassion or forgiveness to our neighbor. We are called to respond to our neighbor with compassion and gratitude, to the beauty of the world and the purity of religious practices, with reverence.

Weil calls *compassion* and gratitude the *supernatural* virtues of justice. This implies that mercy, though unnatural, *is* possible and, moreover, that mercy is true justice. Whereas natural

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid. (emphasis mine)

[95] GG, 113 (emphasis mine)

justice allows for the imbalances of power to play out, supernatural justice understands that at bottom, all things living are sacred and, thus, those who 'possess' power are required by the law of supernatural justice to give power to those who seem to lack power. This, then, is what Weil sees as the difference that faith in God, a God who renounces power for the sake of humanity, makes to our moral being. The natural way of justice is the way that recognizes that all who possess power will use it to their advantage: Weil recounts the story of the battle between the Athenians and the people of the little island of Melos to demonstrate the commonly held belief that justice is the law of the stronger, that what is just is what it is possible for the stronger to command. In contrast, the belief that God is a God who forgives and who suffers hurt, even crucifixion, one who suffers loss so that we may be empowered, radically shifts the moral horizon of our universe. It enables us to show compassion or mercy to one who is in need of life, in need of attention; it enables us to be grateful to those who bring us life, recognizing that it is not by our goodness, but by their consent to grace that we are considered as equals.

Again, Weil, in speaking of the supernatural virtue of justice when it manifests itself in human relations, says that:

> [the] supernatural virtue of justice consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly, in every respect, including the slightest details of accent and attitude, for a detail may be enough to place the weaker party in the condition of inert matter, which on this occasion naturally belongs to him, just as the slightest shock causes water that has remained liquid below freezing point to solidify. [96]

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[96] WG, 143

Attentiveness, which is the substance of compassion, is thus a *supernatural* virtue. Otherwise stated, for Weil, when we are attentive to another human being, the beauty of the world, or liturgy, what we assert by this attention is consent to the power of grace or to the absolute goodness of God. If we are alive to the reality of our spiritual selves, if we recognize that power is not that which is blind to human beings, but that which alone sees human beings, rather than things, then we are living in light of love.

When we attend to another, we participate in a creative process and, as God is the one creator, *attention* is *God working through us.* Attention *is* the activity of grace. Indeed, Weil has several passages echoing precisely this sentiment:

> Only God, present in us, can really think the human quality into the victims of affliction, can really look at them with a look differing from that we give to things, can listen to their voice as we listen to spoken words. Then they become aware that they have a voice, otherwise they would have no occasion to notice it. [97]

> In true love it is not we who love the afflicted; it is God in us who loves them. When we are in affliction, it is God in us who loves those who wish us well. Compassion and gratitude come down from God, and when they are exchanged in a glance, God is present at the point where the eyes of those who give and those who receive meet. [98]

While we do not confer the gift of life on anyone, we can call out the life that is already there in another, by attending to him or her. God is *Creator*; however, we, being made in his image, can be *creative.* Weil understands attention to be the creative faculty in man.

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[97] WG, 150
[98] WG, 151

All of the foregoing ultimately rests on a kenotic understanding of divine love. Love is not only active doing to or for the other, but is also a making space for the other to be other, of letting be, of allowing the other to be something for itself and also for oneself. Love thus involves an element of withdrawal. When we seek to be perfect as God is perfect, we must seek to love kenotically, as God loves. This is what it means to participate in divine love. Supernatural justice does not seek power of the self, but rather, power of the other.

Recalling that the activity which flows from love or grace is significantly different from the acts which are rooted in a belief in the power of force: when we exert our will over that of another human being, nature or the practices of devotion, we are essentially falling due to the force of gravity, the scientific metaphor which Weil employs as a moral term denoting our tendency toward selfishness and moral baseness. In other words, when we cut ourselves off from the spiritual realm and understand ourselves only as entities controlled by the law of force and power that "falls with weight," we are acting as if we were merely physical beings, guided only by mechanistic power. We are acting according to gravity, the law of physics. Thus, the distinction between the logic of will and the logic of attention ultimately derives, in Weil's thought at least, from two understandings of power or goodness. Goodness is either a human product or achievement, for which we can then take credit, or it is a gift that is freely given, for which there is no other response than amazement and gratitude. Faith in the power of the will corresponds to the first understanding of goodness; faith in love corresponds to the latter.

Weil's emphatic distinction between the natural and the supernatural, and her elucidation of the limits of human will and the miraculous quality of attention provides ground for interpreting

her notion of attention *as* an act of grace, and willful activity *as* the manner in which gravity reveals its power over us. This religiously-grounded distinction between effort of the will and the effort of attention thus significantly refigures our understanding of the nature of moral life. If, as is presupposed in Weil's account, we do not grasp goodness, but goodness grasps hold of us, then our construal of moral activity is fundamentally changed. We are no longer *agents* of moral goodness; we *participate* or embody divine love. Our ultimate moral act becomes to *respond* rather than *assert.* However, so as not to create a false dichotomy between response and assertion, it should be noted that the attitude of response is itself an activity, rooted in a belief in and desire for something, namely, the Good. [99] It is thus an affirmation of a particular mode of practice, an existential assertion.

In short, *grace, as the substance of and means to attention,* is the crucial link between religious faith and an other-centered ethic in Weil's thought. Attention, the ultimate moral act is the consent to grace, whether implicit or explicit. This consent transforms on two levels. We have discussed the way in which grace works to decenter us, to destroy the 'I' in us that would

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[99] Furthermore, whereas the Kantian account of duty assumes that we must always be on guard against the potential of desires to corrupt reason, since it is only when we are *rational* that we are moral; Weil seems to suggest that genuine moral existence, virtuous existence, is somewhat *like* inclination, in that it is effortless or, rather, the effort of attention is one in which, in a sense, one is barely there: one's "subjectivity" is not the driving force of the activity; receptivity to the other is. Weil sees a higher sense of "being good" wherein goodness is participatory rather than managerial (even the concept of 'mandatory' seems to be more akin to master-slave than reciprocal). The difference between the Kantian will that conforms to reason and Weil's attention to God motivated by desire is that in the latter case, there *is* a relationship of desire, of *love*, between 'is' and 'ought'. The human ('is') desires God ('ought'), whom it sees as the true 'is', rather than as an 'ought' *commanding* the 'is.' On this reading of morality, that is, goodness considered as *desire* to conform to the divine will, goodness is more akin to inclination rather than obligation (which has undertones of grudge in it). Obedience, Weil might say, is duty invested with love. Interestingly, while Weil preserves the transcendence of the Good and Kant, some would argue, immanentizes the Good in the form of Reason, Weil, it seems, manages to bridge the gap between the human and the divine in a way that Kant's immanentizing moral theory fails to do.

reduce all others to things, rather than beings. Grace thus also gives us a new focus or center: namely, the other. In waiting or being attentive, we are halted in our desperate grasping, and others become gifts, presented *to* us, rather than *for* us. Grace thus transforms the human ego into a responsive, responsible self.

Religious Practices and Ethics

> Prayer and action... can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Prayer without action grows into powerless pietism and action without prayer degenerate into questionable manipulation. If prayer leads us into a deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will always give rise to concrete acts of service. And if concrete acts of service do indeed lead us to a deeper solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the dying, and the oppressed, they will always give rise to prayer. In prayer we meet Christ, and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ. [100]

In keeping with the foregoing, Weil also gives an account of how the *practices* of religion contain the possibility of decentering the moral subject and hence, transforming ethical orientation. To understand what Weil means by prayer requires a prior understanding of Weil's concepts of attention, will, moral energy, natural and supernatural necessity, as the section on 'Love of Religious Practices' in *Waiting for God* essentially links the powers of gravity and grace, and the activities of will and attention, with *secular morality* and *religion*, respectively. Weil associates the concepts of gravity and the will with secular morality; similarly, she understands there to be a deep unity between grace, attention, and religion.

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[100]Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing*, 139.

> It is because the will has no power to bring about salvation that the idea of a secular morality is an absurdity. What is called morality only depends on the will in what is, so to speak, its most muscular aspect. Religion, on the contrary, corresponds to desire and it is desire that saves. [101]

> The notion of grace, as opposed to virtue depending on the will, and that of inspiration, as opposed to intellectual or artistic work, these two notions, if they are well understood, show the efficacy of desire and waiting. [102]

> Attention animated by desire is the whole foundation of religious practices. That is why no system of morality can take their place. [103]

These passages are obscure if one is not acquainted with Weil's religious worldview, in which grace is the only power that can truly effect redemptive transformation in this world, and desire and attention (or waiting) are the only human activities that can call grace into the chaos of injustice, suffering and evil. Recalling the earlier discussion of the God whose love for the world manifests itself in self-renunciation, God's distance from the world is not a sign of his disinterest, but rather, a sign of his infinite love. God loves humanity so deeply that he gives us the freedom to choose, even to 'choose' our own demise: namely, the law of self-sufficiency and self-love (the law of gravity). Hence, it is only by our *free consent* to the law of grace that God's power descends to transform (natural) necessity into goodness (supernatural necessity). God waits for us to call him into our midst by our desire, and we, in our desire, wait for him to respond. God will

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[101] WG, 195
[102] WG, 197
[103] WG, 197

not impose his power on us; nor can we impose our power on God. According to Weil, it is a completely dialogical relationship characterized by mutual attention, mutual love.

This is why the will is so futile a method for gaining salvation. For, as Weil puts it, what we need is deliverance *from ourselves*; hence, *we* cannot be the ones to perform the saving act.

> Any attempt to gain this deliverance by means of my own energy would be like the efforts of a cow that pulls at its hobble and so falls onto its knees. [104]

For those who are partial to secular morality, however, the immediate response will doubtless be: Why raise the issue of salvation? What need have we of salvation? We do not believe that we are 'fallen'; hence, we do not think that we need to be saved. In fact, one who waits for a Saviour shows the absurdity of *religion*. If we *are* fallen, then we should *do* something to rise from that state. Waiting does nothing to eradicate tyranny, oppression and evil in the forms of physical, psychological and emotional affliction. Waiting seems almost to be complicit with evil in the world. Thus, secular morality is the true antidote to human suffering and evil.

Weil, however, has a response to these objectors. Weil perceives that *at the root* of all perversions of good, at the root of injustice, unfaithfulness and unkindness is the *active* ego. Hence, if *this* is the source of all human problems, then the solution to these same problems must involve the deactivation of the ego. A solution which evades the problem of egoism fails to be a real solution at all. Since we are all under the power of 'gravity', which compels us to believe that we are independent, self-sufficient creatures and thus do not need to be charitable, do not need

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[104] GG, 47

to *recognize* the other; the deactivation of the ego, which gains its strength from our consent to the natural order, requires us to consent to another power, which *transcends* the dominion of gravity. This power can only be grace or love. The law of grace or love is the only law that omits any justification of the human ego. Moreover, only acts fueled by grace and love can *transform* human suffering (natural necessity) into good (supernatural necessity). Acceding to the power of gravity is the same as assenting to the law of selfishness (not the fact, but the *law* of selfishness), and attempting to transform or to bring about good under these laws is, as Weil sees it, utterly futile. It is impossible to work in accord with the law of the self for the ends of the other or love. Otherwise put, one cannot reason to love (grace) through the logic of force (gravity).

According to Weil, grace only descends if we desire it and if, in light of that desire, we wait steadfastly for it.

> ... for desire directed toward God is the only power capable of raising the soul. Or rather, it is God alone who comes down and possesses the soul, but desire alone draws God down. He only comes to those who ask him to come and he cannot refuse to come to those who implore him long, often, and ardently. [105]

Weil states that "religion corresponds to desire" and that "attention motivated by desire is the whole foundation of religious practices." Here, then, is the crux of the thesis: religion, according to Weil, is "nothing else but a looking." [106] In its most authentic form, religion is a body of

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[105] WG, 110-111
[106] WG, 199

practices that cultivates looking.[107] In addition, our necessary response to another human being, our *responsibility* to another human being, is also *looking*, or *attention*. Weil emphasizes two things concerning religious practices: first, that they bring us into contact with that which is completely pure, and second, that *looking* is the manner by which we 'drink from the source of purity." [108]

Weil is convinced that the muscular will does not bring us a step toward goodness. Weil believes that it is only through attention to (all of) reality that we can approach justice and love. In the latter half of the section 'Love of Religious Practices,' Weil *identifies* Christianity with this very understanding of goodness. She states,

> One of the principal truths of Christianity, a truth that goes almost unrecognized today, is that looking is what saves us. [109]

According to Simone Weil, religion (not only Christianity) is superior to a secular morality because religion is simply "a looking," its foundation is "attention motivated by desire," and this is superior to making everything dependent on the will. Secular morality, on the other hand, is based on the will. As we have already seen, Weil considers muscular efforts of the will to be utterly useless in matters of goodness, truth and beauty. These things cannot be attained by anything but our desire and our pure looking, based on that desire. To strive for them with efforts

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[107] Weil has said something similar about school studies and appreciation of the beauty of the natural world. This is why I do not say that religion is the only means by which we can learn attention, which is the substance of an ethic of attention. Yet, insofar as this thesis is interested in showing how religion, in particular, has relevance to morality, I am emphasizing Weil's account of religion, the "practices founded on attention motivated by desire."

[108] WG, 192

[109] Ibid.

of the will is to believe that goodness is a logical function of the human *ego*. Weil clarifies what she means by the futility of the will and the profundity of attention by invoking the notions of grace and inspiration, advising us to hold these concepts beside those of willful virtue and intellectual (or) artistic work, respectively [110]. She does not further expound this analogy. It becomes clear, however, what she means by the virtue of desiring and waiting (or attention): there is an element of *gift* and *effortlessness* to virtue that is not adequately expressed by an ethic based on the will and (human) agency. True beauty comes *to* us; we do not encounter it by *our* striving. Beauty holds *our* gaze, rather than the contrary. Again, it is evident that Weil is careful not to reduce beauty, goodness and other ultimate values to our capacities; rather, Weil shows how these aspects of reality, reality *itself*, exceeds our grasp of it, and yet is simultaneously open to our experience if we attend to it.

Hence, since attention is the ultimate moral response and attention is the very substance of religious practices, namely prayer, one can see the deep connection between religious practice and an attentive attitude to all persons. In fact, Weil goes as far as to say that attention and prayer are really two words signifying the same activity[111]:

"Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love." [112]

"Prayer being only attention in its pure form..." [113]

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[110] WG, 197
[111] GG, 170: "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."... "Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious..."
[112] WG, 170
[113] WG, 173

Thus, religious practices such as prayer are the manner in which we are involved in the creative process of the world. By our attention to God, we learn to attend to all others, and by this attention, we participate in the small and gradual, yet tangible and certain redemption of the world. As the theologian Karl Rahner puts it, "To clasp the hands in prayer is to begin an uprising against the disorder of the world." Living the 'good' life or the moral life *is* living prayerfully or religiously. For Weil there is no distinction, since attention is the only truly moral action[114] and prayer is the preeminent example of attention. Otherwise stated, if *our moral imperative is to attend* (as any exertion of our will, aside from the control of the impulse to stray from attending, flouts the supernatural order of necessity i.e. goodness) and religion is the *practice* of pure attention, then religion, as a body of practices, *is* moral engagement. Hence, not only is religion *not in tension* with morality, and not only does it *cooperate* with morality, but it is and it enables a higher morality, one that is more genuine because the self-serving motive is destroyed in every genuine act of attending.

If prayer is *attention* in its pure form, then prayer is the most fully other-centered activity there is. Prayer is not, contrary to popular belief, mere supplication, although this is one form of prayer.[115] Nor is worship an investment in one's own eternal well-being, as it is commonly taken to be. These are interpretations of religion from an egocentric point of view. According to Weil,

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[114] Actually, Weil eventually shifts from describing the implicit love of God as various "forms of love" to "attitudes of love": "Thus, strictly speaking, we are no longer concerned with forms of love, but with attitudes inspired by love." (WG, 210). This shift highlights the fundamental sameness of love, whether it is for nature, neighbor, (religious) culture, or friend: all are attitudes of looking at the Good.

[115] Even in supplicationary prayer, however, there is the element of dependence on something or, rather, someone other than oneself, of relationship – which often gets unnoticed in the emphasis on the desired end of such prayer, which seems to indicate the self-centeredness of prayer.

however, religious practices are precisely the antidote to egocentricity, since they allow for contact with that which destroys the notion of the self as ultimate. To worship God is, moreover, not only to recognize that the self is not ultimate but also to realize that the self is dependent, that goodness comes from *without*. It seems that one of the main falsehoods that underlie an egocentric view of the world is that we are self-sufficient. The practice of worship, which, metaphorically speaking, is the means by which the soul confesses dependence and asks for nourishment, is simply the diametric opposite of such belief in self-sufficiency. The self-understanding presupposed by worship therefore also makes it possible for one to acknowledge the dependency of self on others. If one believes that human existence and survival ultimately depends on a being beyond our control, then this fundamentally changes our faith in oneself and one's expectations of other finite human beings. In other words, respect for God makes it possible to respect all finite selves, self and others. Faith makes *respect* possible. In worship there is also a recognition that someone other than oneself is, in H.Richard Niebuhr's words, the center of value, the supreme good.[116]

Weil is, however, careful to distinguish between authentic religion and the "social imitation of faith." Her rejection of the latter is for the same reason that she rejects secular morality. Both are false because both are inherently egoistic. The social imitation of faith is the form of religion which is simply in accord with the *natural* order of necessity. Weil criticizes those who rely on the will to bring them to goodness for fearing the power of goodness or the power of

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[116] Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 24.

love to transform their willful selves, for this transformation requires death. To rely on the will is to refuse to relinquish the will, the latter of which is necessary for grace to descend. Similarly, the selves who participate in the social imitation of faith are living out of will rather than their decreated and hence, attentive selves. Weil sees the social form of religion as false religion because it is a source of consolation for the false self, the self that gains a sense of power from "belonging" to a collective. However, "Love is not consolation, it is light." [117] And light, according to Weil, is only available when the veils or illusions created by the imagination in service of the will are decreated by the soul in cooperation with God.

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Weil essentially shows us that we cannot extract an ethic of compassion out of a modern metaphysic which trades on the power of the individual to use all of his or her own power to 'save' him or herself. The language of autonomy is simply not capable of giving rise to a response to the other that is rooted in true love for the other. Reason does not contain the necessary nuances for acts of love which involve the willingness to suffer hurt for the sake of the well-being of the other. It is the great lucidity of Weil on the reality of human power that allows us to understand that something outside, beyond a 'sense' of the tragic or unjust, is needed to bring about compassion. This kind of surface sense only leads to a concept of fairness as a redistribution of resources, which is never possible because the necessary condition for such redistribution, namely, grace, is not admitted. In a finite order, according to Weil, mechanism

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[117] GG, 13

dominates and mechanism cannot generate 'moral energy' within creatures who feel an existential lack, which would allow them to provide for the other. Only a new vision, an ability to 'see' that we are fully sustained in our acts of compassion and gratitude toward others, allows for the possibility of free expenditures of energy. Put another way, while a Christian economy does not seem to function on the level of exchange, it is in fact a total redistribution of supplies, the only difference is that the redistribution is creative; it is creative because it gives the strength of the strong to the weak and, thus, gives life to the weak. This kind of creative act does not take place in the 'natural' schema of human society. In the 'natural' order, the strong become stronger by exploiting its power over the weak. Only God, who sees the human personality in the weak, can, through us, give life to the weak. Otherwise stated, it is through the eyes of faith that we can love our neighbor such that we are willing to give of ourselves to build up our neighbor.

It is well and good to talk about the importance of caring and compassion in ethics. It is another thing to know how we can bring about this reality in human beings. Weil points us in *a* direction, at least, with her work on attention. First, Weil gives us an account of what attention consists in; she reiterates the patient, focused, persevering, suffering, sacrificial, nurturing character of attention in her examination of the person of the Good Samaritan, and, especially, of the person of Christ. Having given us an idea of what she takes attention to be, Weil explains that this activity is divine. Weil connects this moral response with grace. All acts of charity are "God loving God through us." Thus, worship, prayer and contemplation ('school studies'), insofar as they are avenues through which the human being encounters God (also in contemplating the beauty of the world – therefore, Weil recounts all the classic avenues to the eternal: aesthetic,

moral and religious), are activities which de-center us, and re-center us (in God), thus allowing us to attend to our neighbor (as well as the natural world). As we have mentioned before, it is grace which both makes attention possible and grace which is the substance of attention. On Weil's account, the significance of a religious orientation to moral life is that in love of God and participation in religious practices (an implicit form of the love of God) grace descends. We need grace *in order* to de-center and re-center, and it is grace at work when we *are* centered on the other (grace is manifest in a realization that the center of the universe is outside of oneself).

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Up to this point, we have not considered any problems or objections that might be raised against Weil's views. There are several that come to mind. For example, how does Weil's ethic affect oppressed people? Are those who are oppressed required to attend to the other, their oppressors, as well? Does this attitude not perpetuate oppression? Secondly, in what way is Weil not another 'necrophillic' thinker, who locates all goodness outside of this world and thereby renders this world meaningless? Finally, is this ethic one that really overcomes the central problem of self-preoccupation in ethics? Or is it subject-centered as well, though in a different way from the ethic of will and agency? While these are questions that Jantzen would presumably raise, they are not merely relevant for this reason alone. It is likely that others who have objections to Weil's religious ethic would also share these concerns. Thus, to these we now turn.

Is this an ethic for the oppressed?

A strong objection to Weil's position, and my development thereof, is that attention is complicit with evil. Perhaps, the argument runs, attending, love and prayer do unfold in the

manner described by Weil, but only insofar as the individual concerned is in a position where such attitudes are free to develop. But what about the downtrodden? What about those who are oppressed, whether in body or in spirit? Surely it is at best a chimera and at worst a form of moral quietism to suggest that they can equally embrace this ethic of attention. It is in response to charges of this nature that I would like to clarify the social message of Weil.

Would Weil advise "waiting" and "submitting" to oppressed groups? Would she not see that this attitude is precisely what will keep these sufferers in their suffering? Given that Weil was acutely aware of the existential disparity between those in power and those who are disenfranchised, that she was deeply concerned with liberating the oppressed, *and* that she would not qualify her conviction in the salvific power of attention to God, it seems that the charge itself reveals a misunderstanding of Weil's notion of attention. Weil's ethic of attention originates out of a deep consideration of what can be done about human suffering. Let us then explore how Weil's ethic of attention would apply to those most *in need of* attention.

There is no indication in Weil's religious writings that her ethic of attention excludes the oppressed in its message. Weil sees that what is needed *on all sides* is attention to the Good, or to God; yet, how this imperative to attend would manifest itself in human relationships is in loving attention or waiting *by the stronger* on the weaker. Her understanding of how we can come closer to social justice is that the stronger must ask the weaker "What are you going through?" Although Weil emphasizes that the genuine moral response *is* attending to the other, Weil is not suggesting that the weaker ask their oppressors, "what are you going through?" yet neither would she say that the weaker ought to 'take a stand,' 'assert' themselves, 'empower' themselves. This

would be to endorse an act of will, something which Weil would never do; it is dangerous for the reason that if the oppressed group achieved any sort of success through an exertion of will, they might then fall into the logic that by the will alone, it is possible to "rise in the vertical direction." [118] In other words, they would adopt the logic of their oppressors, the will to power.

What is interesting is that Weil's moral message concerning the oppressed is directed at the oppressor.[119] In a culture where "do it yourself" seems to be the "way out" of any adverse circumstance, Weil's suggestion of waiting is no doubt baffling. Since there are no directives of the self-help variety for the oppressed, Weil is likely to be misread as supporting resignation. Yet, Weil is not espousing resignation insofar as this means giving up all effort to change structures and practices of injustice. Weil seeks to show, however, that what is considered a productive or active response to evil in the world is, in fact, generally misguided and ultimately futile. Weil considers the 'call to action' in the form of activism undesirable, as it is a formulaic, universal catch-all approach, which, in the end, catches none because planning is inevitably a finitely efficacious activity. People, in order to be aided, need to be heard, seen -- in short, attended to. Activism generally precludes such attention to particular sufferers. Weil's call to action is the call to attend. Love, though seemingly indirect, is the only possibility whereby these oppressed groups will truly be empowered. Love, alone, does not participate in the cycle of oppression,

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[118] As we have expounded earlier, Weil does not think that we can take a step toward goodness, but that goodness comes to us, if we call it down by our desire.
[119] Weil, *Human Personality*, 15-16.

since love implies a decreated ego. It is thus that many political theorists have described Weil as one who understands "justice as compassion." [120]

The appropriate response of the oppressed to this love, moreover, would be gratitude. Again, it is important to remember that Weil understands 'gratitude' as a supernatural virtue; as such, it is different from 'servile thanks.' While the obligation of gratitude on the part of the poor may seem to connote indebtedness of the 'recipient' of good to the 'moral agent,' this is not at all the case since this is not the paradigm within which Weil is working. Already, the language of 'recipient' and 'agent' bespeaks a different understanding of moral life. Compassion and gratitude are, for Weil, the manifestations of supernatural grace. Thus, they are each 'gift': the one who shows gratitude makes a gift of humanity to the one who shows compassion *as much as* the compassionate person does to the one who is grateful. In this vision of ethical relationship, there is no clear demarcation between giver and receiver, and hence, there is no element of indebtedness or feeling of poverty for the one who putatively 'receives.'

Moreover, Weil also discusses the unique gift that the afflicted have in their power to give to everyone else. Weil states:

> He who is aching in every limb, worn out by the effort of a day of work, that is to say a day when he has been subject to matter, bears the reality of the universe in his flesh like a thorn. The difficulty for him is to look and to love. If he succeeds, he loves the Real. That is the immense privilege God has reserved for his poor. But they scarcely ever know it. No one tells them. Excessive fatigue, harassing money worries, and the lack of true culture prevent them from noticing it. A

[120] Several Weil scholars have developed this aspect of Weil's thought eg. Richard H. Bell, Rush Rhees, Andreas Teubner, etc.

> slight change in these conditions would be enough to open the door to a treasure. It is heart-rending to see how easy it would be in many cases for men to procure a treasure for their fellows and how they allow centuries to pass without taking the trouble to do so. [121]

In other words, Weil sees the *gift* that people who live in poverty and suffering are: they are the face of reality. They, like "the artist, the scholar, the philosopher, [and] the contemplative" (ibid) have the capacity to reveal truth to the rest of us, as affliction, like school studies, contemplation of nature, and religious practices, are avenues through which God reveals himself - to those who attend. Thus, it is clear that Weil's ethic of attention does not maintain the validity of false power or tyranny, but actually exposes its impoverishment.

Is Weil's Religious Ethic Ultimately Necrophillic?

> One-world thinking, whether as this-worldliness or as other-worldliness, has always betrayed Christianity into the denial of some of its fundamental convictions. It will do so in the case of history no less than in metaphysics and ethics. But how to think in two-worldly terms without lapsing into di-theism remains a problem of great import for faith. [122]

On the face of it, it is hard to see how Weil would *not* be guilty of harbouring some sort of otherworldly conception of good, and hence, exemplify the necrophillic way of thinking that Jantzen criticizes so roundly. Yet, if we consider what Jantzen understands to be the ethical implications of an emphasis on the otherworldly, then clearly Weil's thinking is not 'necrophillic.' Jantzen's interpretation of any doctrine of 'salvation' that is the principal source of otherworldly thinking is that it detracts from social, political action in the present. In contrast, Weil's

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[121] WG, 170
[122] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 82-83.

understanding of salvation is that it shifts our moral response into the mode of *attending* rather than *willing.* More than anything, what salvation seems to indicate for Weil is the weakness of human wills, the finitude of human power. This notion of the need to be saved does not thereby lead to and *terminate in* resignation. On the contrary, it can lead to a vision of the Good, which calls us to be still, and to wait. Waiting or *looking*, in a manner that is attentive yet detached, is not an *im*moral response, but a moral response that goes beyond the moral response of willful action since the latter ultimately defeats relationship between self and other and ethics, to reiterate, is nothing if not a matter of being in relationship.

To equate traditional religious faith and disengagement from the affairs of this world is thus an argument wrongly premised on a dualistic notion of love. Love of God, on this reading, competes with love of neighbor. Weil, however, shows how faith only leads to a deeper and more genuine concern for the other, as faith is the very opening up of oneself to another. Making oneself vulnerable to another's pain, participating in vulnerability, that is, *compassion*, is the fruit of faith; compassion is only possible if we have consented to give up the need to *preserve* ourselves from pain, if we have consented to the destruction of our egos.[122] The movement of faith then is the movement of grace or love within us: grace lifts us out of ourselves, decenters us, such that, rather than pulling all that is around us into us (reduction of the world to self i.e. egology), we are pulled out, poured out, into the world. Love of God, then, does not necessarily preclude moral response but, on Weil's narrative, actually enhances it.

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[122] In Waiting for God, Weil states, "The will is not afraid of fatigue, but death." This is, in effect, a statement expounding the fear of God that hinders faith.

Weil has several specific notions contesting the necrophillic or quietistic quality of religious faith. Her discussion of the falling motion of grace, for example, I interpret to mean that grace is the movement whereby we 'go under', rather than a 'rise up' above (or away from) this world.

"To come down by a movement in which gravity plays no part... Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight?" [123]

"Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace and the descending movement of the second degree of grace." [124]

"To lower oneself is to rise in the domain of moral gravity. Moral gravity makes us fall towards the heights." [125]

These aphoristic statements suggest that there is more to Weil's understanding of gravity and grace than that of a force which lowers and a counter-force that elevates. Or, rather, the elevation of faith consists in its allowing us to go beyond egocentricity into a mode of genuine responsiveness to the other. In other words, the movement of grace is a rising that is, paradoxically, a going under (a term that has been coined in spiritual theology to suggest essentially the same idea: "downward mobility"), which unifies individuals, brings them into relationship, instead of preventing it. If ego inhibits ethics and faith destroys the ego, then faith allows for ethics to be more genuinely embodied.

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[123] GG, 3
[124] Ibid. 3-4
[125] Ibid. 4

Along the same lines, Weil likens faith to a kind of lens through which reality takes on greater meaning. At the end of *Waiting for God*, Weil states,

> Our neighbor, our friends, religious ceremonies, and the beauty of the world do not fall to the level of unrealities after the soul has had direct contact with God. On the contrary, it is only then that these things become real. Previously they were half dreams. Previously they had no reality. [126]

These are succinct testaments to the belief that love of God does not *compete* with love of humanity but enhances and secures it. While love of God is prior to humanity's love for God, love of God reveals itself in the loving voice and gaze of one neighbor to another, the kiss of nature, and the embrace of the practices that lift us closer to God. Love of God is the "womb" in which we are nurtured and cultivated to love fully the rest of creation. This latter love, if real, is only the culmination of divine love and love for the divine. Again, faith renews or deepens reality; it is not a flight from reality.

Weil also makes mention of grace as moral energy. This is another concept that can easily be misinterpreted to imply that human action is futile. However, Weil, by affirming a need for supernatural moral energy does not thereby assert that humans lack the capacity for meaningful human action. Rather, her claim is only that humans cannot act in a truly redeeming manner unaided by love, which she sees as a supernatural virtue. The doctrine of the moral energy of grace is simply a counter-argument to the notion that we can strive for and achieve enlightenment (or redemption) wholly on our own. This is hardly disputable, given our daily, lived

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[126] WG, 214-215

experience of moral fallibility. In fact, the need for grace seems only to be offensive if absolute human autonomy (an obvious falsehood) is first assumed.

There is, of course, the counter-argument that we *must* consider God to be absent; otherwise, we cannot be responsible. Once we say that God is present, we allow ourselves to say that goodness is God's work. It is not. It is unacceptable to think it is. It is unacceptable because we must be responsible. Levinas and Jantzen would likely be among those who hold this interpretation of God's work and human responsibility. What is important to note is that Weil's narrative does not deny that we must be responsible. Her point, however, is that without God, we *cannot* be responsible. The difference in her story is that an account is given of human finitude and, in particular, *moral* finitude.

To this, the aforementioned critics would probably reiterate, 'Responsibility is impossible once you say that you cannot do anything without God. This premise is a non-starter.' Weil's response: To say that you *can* do anything apart from God is a non-starter. If the kind of responsibility we are discussing is *attention*, then this requires us to be other-centered 'all the way down', so to speak. If there is any truth to the reality of egoism and subject-centeredness in ethics, then this means that *conversion* or *transformation* becomes an issue. It is not enough to merely state the new vision of an other-centered ethic. Will a cognitive turn manifest itself in transformed practices? Or is the response of one human to another comprised of more than a conceptual disposition? Consent to grace (i.e. faith) is the recognition that there is another sort of decentering and recentering (apart from conceptual) required for responsibility. Hence, this is the effect of conceding to the reality of the infinite, not moral complacency.

Is this Ethic Really Other-Centered?

Given the extended discussion of what it means to be moral, of appropriate moral response and attitude: in what way is this *not* just a return to the self-centered, narcissistic pattern of traditional ethical theory, and religious ethics in particular? Though the self is now required to attend or "be with" rather than to "do for," is the moral status of the agent nonetheless at the heart of the matter? [127] The vague and contentious doctrine of decreation here reveals its significance. If my interpretation of decreation holds, meaning that decreation is not utterly destructive, but is destruction for the sake of reconstruction, then the Weilian doctrine of the self is the best possible example of a non-egoistic moral self. While there is an 'I' operating in Weil's moral philosophy, this 'I' is not an egoistic 'I'. The 'I' who attends, that is, the moral self, is not an 'I' in the sense of a self-aggrandizing moral agent, since that 'I' has been decreated. If one is behaving as a moral self in Weil's terms, then one *cannot* be an 'I' in the truncated sense: "Attention alone – that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears – is required of me." [128] The attentive self is the self that relates to the other through first relating to God, [129] such that there is no will which seeks to dominate the other or empower the self (for Weil, the desire for self-empowerment is the same attitude that characterizes acts of domination):

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[127] On the face of it, since it is not a willful ethic, it does not reflect on the status of the agent; rather, its fruit is revealed in the renewal of the person in need of moral response. But this will not suffice for the critic.

[128] GG, 107

[129] GG, 22: "To implore a man is a desperate attempt through sheer intensity to make our system of values pass into him. To implore God is just the contrary: it is an attempt to make the divine values pass into ourselves. Far from thinking, with all the intensity of which we are capable, of the values to which we are attached, we must preserve an interior void."

In fact, Weil will say that there is really no 'I' in any genuine act of compassion or creation. All such moments are the event of grace passing through us. It is God in us who listens and looks at the afflicted in their pain, God in us who creates great works of art and intellect.[130] The impersonal 'I' is the bearer of good in the world; according to Weil, all that bears the stamp of "personality" [131] is unimportant. Whether or not Weil is correct to hold what is 'personal' in such contempt is debatable. Many have argued that her emphasis on the impersonal quality of attention is a drawback rather than a strength in her ethic. This, however, is not significant for the issue at hand. What is relevant is that Weil views the moral 'I' or the attending 'I' as decreated and recreated by God, *in* God, meaning that it is an 'I' that is neither 'subject' nor 'agent' in the modern sense of those words. The moral self is 'God loving God through us'; as such, there is no 'I' to which praise or blame can be ascribed.

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[130] HP, 17
[131] 'Human Personality' essay

Conclusion

This thesis is an attempt to recover the significance of a religious worldview or perspective, and the body of practices premised on this worldview, for philosophical ethics in light of the postmodern turn to the other. The egoism implicit in modern, secular philosophical ethics, an egoism which leads to unsatisfactory ethical results, has been the platform from which we have moved into a consideration of religion. I have attempted to demonstrate that a religious perspective can effectively address this failing in philosophical ethics, since religion does consider the reality of egoism extensively [132] and thus has an understanding of what is needed to transform it. The upshot of my argument is that religion, as faith in grace or the goodness of God and, particularly, as *embodied* faith (i.e., as a body of practices), de-centers the ego and re-centers it around God, thus enabling the realization of a genuine ethic of the other.

I have attempted to demonstrate the ethical significance of religion by exploring the thought of two diverse thinkers, Grace Jantzen and Simone Weil. Jantzen, a contemporary feminist philosopher of religion, provided the framework of postmodern ethics, which favours the 'other', and suggested one way in which philosophy of religion can contribute to achieving that moral ideal: redefining religious symbolic in terms of life rather than death. Weil, a French philosopher, mystic and social activist who lived in the early part of the 20th century, described in a radically different manner the way in which the religious and the ethical converge on the issue

[132] I.e., the counterpart of any doctrine of salvation, which most religions possess, is the doctrine of an imperfect self, and often the imperfection is associated with self-centeredness.

of other-centeredness: in prayer, attention in its pure form. I will now give a brief review of the manner in which these thinkers have allowed me to think through the central idea of this thesis.

Grace Jantzen's work on religious symbolic helps us to see the way in which religion transforms or, rather, *informs* the moral self through the imagination. This is certainly a partial truth about the nature of religion; in a manner of speaking, it *is* a symbolic: it clearly shapes our moral consciousness through the images and narratives in which it comes to us. The limitation of the conception of religion as symbolic is that it presupposes an idea of religion as choice, similar to a consumer's choice of a product.[133] Religion, however, is a form of life and, as such, we are already embedded in it; it is not as intentional and malleable as our imaginative desires. (Simone Weil touches on this when she says that a person should try to find God within her own tradition before going outside of it.) While a product is something which is alienated from the consumer, no matter how much it is desired, religious faith, if genuine, is always already present in a person's self-conception and therefore forms (at least part of) the ground from which other choices are made.

Moreover, we are always exceeded in our choices. We choose more than we know or think that we are choosing. Hence, a symbolic of natality and human flourishing, though it may seem desirable in itself, may nevertheless foster less than desirable understandings, such as an

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[133] BD, 161: "Fundamentally, the choice of the language of salvation rather than the language of flourishing both denotes and reinforces an anthropology of a very particular kind. If we think in terms of salvation, then the human condition must be conceptualized as a problematic state, a state in which human beings need urgent rescue, otherwise calamity or death will befall. The human situation is a negative one, from which we ned to be delivered. In Christian theology, this obviously links with the idea of a divine saviour, and hence with Christology and with the doctrine of incarnation and the trinity. But how would we characterize the human situation in all its diversity if we used instead the model of flourishing?"

over-inflated notion of human power. Jantzen may not intend her new vision for philosophy of religion to ignite a return to humanism, yet it seems that this is, in effect, what her symbolic of life and divine becoming leads us toward. At the very least, it does not curb the tendency to want to be gods, which, because a symbolic is to a large extent *unconscious*, means that while we may convince ourselves that we now hold a different concept of God -- non-infinite, non-omnipotent, non-omnicient, and altogether non-absolute -- and that this is what we seek to become, it is more than likely that we are not yet so far advanced from the humanists of old whose desire was to be the omni-everything God of old. [134]

Yet, even if we accept Jantzen's use of the language of religious symbolic, a new symbolic celebrating otherness can only be effective if there is an accompanying set of practices that embodies the new ethos. Change at the theoretical level will not suffice to transform ethics, since the ethics has as its central concern human relationships and transformation of this latter requires more than theoretical refiguring. Thus, at the end of Chapter One, I put forth the idea that a more embodied account of religion, i.e., religion in the form of practices such as prayer and worship might be more fruitful for the overall attempt to reconcile religion and ethics, since it is possibly the case that religious practices themselves, and not merely a religious symbolic, contain within them the source of moral transformation.

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[134] Again, this might be along the lines of the critique that I have raised against Jantzen throughout. She seems to place too much faith in the transformative power of ideas and less on their embodied counterpart. In other words, her notion of effective change through symbolic never quite convinces, especially since she acknowledges the *non*-intentional nature of symbolic (it is the fount of our understanding(s) which in many ways precedes our consent).

I turned, in Part Two, to Simone Weil because, while she shares Jantzen's concern for the other and considers how religion can enable this concern to become manifest, unlike Jantzen, Weil expounds the purity of attention involved in *prayer*, thereby showing the deep interconnection between faith *practices* and moral responses. The distinction could be made that whereas Jantzen sees religion as a thought system, a web of "meanings, myths and conceptualizations," Weil understands it as a way of existing in the world.

Moreover, Weil allows us to revisit the problem of egoism in greater detail, since Jantzen simply signaled the problem, but did not delve into the fundamentally incoherent character of egoistic ethics. The will-centered or ego-centered perspective is untenable in an ethical context since, by virtue of the ethical context, there is an implicit commitment to living out *relationship*. Weil expounds with brutal honesty how force functions as a principle of human action: the weaker in the relationship is inevitably reduced to a mere thing. The stronger is also rendered little more than a thing since his orientation of dominance towards all others prevents him from consenting to something other than himself; he, then, is a slave to his own ego. Thus, where there are simply two 'tiles blown off a roof' (Weil's poetic way of describing the effect of force on human beings), relationship is impossible. Since ethics implies relationship and force precludes it, force and ethics are incompatible. Weil aids us by pointing out the incompatibility of willful effort and compassion; in fact, Weil would likely interpret Jantzen's attempt to reconcile religion and morality through a new symbolic as a will-driven enterprise that fundamentally misunderstands the transforming capacity of religion.

Weil grounds her ethic explicitly on concern for the other, *using love of God as the foundation*. By drawing a distinction between an ethic of will and the ethic of attention, Weil illustrates how love is a fundamentally different *orientation* to the world, which therefore involves a certain kind of effort that is distinct from any other sort of effort. It is the effort of letting ourselves *be done to*, an effort of restraint. For Weil, it is the manner in which religion redefines activity as waiting, looking, and desiring, that makes it a means through which we may experience genuine conversion from self as ego to responsive, compassionate self. The search for God, if it is genuine and persistent enough, will eventually reveal that God is *not* found by active seeking, but by active waiting. If the religious "quest" leads us to continually develop a capacity to wait or to be attentive, then, as a form of life it enables us to *respond* to all things including the human 'other' with attention rather than will. Yet, waiting is not equivalent to doing nothing. Waiting involves a continual, conscious effort to not attempt to manipulate reality, particularly in the realm of human relations.

The quality of this ethic can be seen in the comparison of an egoistic attempt to be compassionate, namely pity, and a non-egoistic, that is, a genuine act of compassion, charity. Pity still lies within the natural order. The one who pities another fails to see the sacredness in the one being pitied, and so, pity is really a self-reflexive moment that engenders a sense of false magnanimity. Pity preserves distance for the sake of distinction or incommensurability. Love, on the other hand, preserves distance for the sake of communion and communication, in order to let the other speak, to enable the other to return to the community from which he or she was expelled for lacking "power." Love does not halt at passing observation sheathed in emotion; love

stops before the afflicted and asks, "What are you going through?" In this pause before the other, one participates in the other's pain so that the one being attended is not viewed as a thing, but recognized as a fellow human being, worthy of response.

The religious lens through which Weil understands the world thus shows us in a different fashion the way in which a religious consciousness is ethically relevant and efficacious: it redefines human orientation to the world in terms of attention rather than appropriation and domination. Faith is attention to reality, which enables us to move out of an egoistic space into one that is less so. Faith, then, is the counter-movement to egoism. Again, Weil also draws a connection between religious practices such as prayer and the capacity to attend (which for her is the ultimate moral response). Some, like Iris Murdoch, have taken Weil's support of religious practices to suggest that all that is needed is the application of certain specific means in order to obtain the desired result of an ethic of attention. This, however, is a mistaken interpretation of Weil's account of the saving power of religious practices since they are not merely "devices for attending to worthy objects." [135] Prayer is not a means to an end. The practice of prayer does not have mere instrumental or potential power. Its virtue does not exist outside of itself since it *is* itself the preeminent act of attending, hence, the most profound moral act. As Weil clearly considers prayer attention in its pure form, it is equally evident that she does not understand it as a device, but the opposite: the culmination of responsible human action. (An illustration of the extent to which prayer can be other-centered is intercessionary prayer, or prayer for others.) The

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[135] Malikail, "Iris Murdoch On God, the Good and Religion"

distinction is important as it signifies Weil's understanding of human beings as fundamentally religious beings.

Jantzen claimed that her other-centered ethic was premised on "acting for love of the world." The difference between her understanding of what it means to "act for love of the world" and Weil's is that Weil considers this love to be God's love. According to Weil, only God can love the world. Thus, she understands that it is only through consenting to God that we can be free of our egos and better able to actualize goodness in the world. In other words, Weil's ethic of the other is born out of relationship: attention (of one human being towards another) is the fruit of a preceding love, namely, the love of God for humanity and humanity for God. Attention is not an autonomous ethical choice.

These are the ideas that have been presented in the main body of the thesis. The contribution of Weil's thought on how a religious orientation implies attention and hence, an other-centered ethic, has been the primary way in which I have sought to address what I feel to be a major shortcoming in philosophical ethics, egoism, and have invited interest on the part of contemporary ethicists to consider the contribution that religion can make to their enterprise. To be more explicit, I have explored Simone Weil's ethic of attention, which is grounded on a religious understanding of the world, and found that it indeed provides an ethic that is not, at root, subject-centered, rationalistic and hence,[136] egoistic.

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[136] The connection between 'rationalistic' and 'egoistic' was previously established by Jantzen's discussion of epistemology and egoism.

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The discussion of religion and morality in philosophy of religion has often followed the pattern of problematizing the epistemological characteristics (or lack thereof) of religion. That is, it has been a discussion of religious beliefs, their certainty and uncertainty, their universality and subjectiveness. Along with Jantzen, I have sought to pursue the possibility of religious ethics through a consideration of its existential impact. I have, however, criticized Jantzen for overly conceptualizing moral experience (although this has been her own critique of traditional philosophy of religion) and have attempted to show how religion can transform ethics, not merely at the cognitive level, but in lived experience, through an exploration of Weil. Thus, in part, I have tried to show the vacuity of the postmodern attempt to redescribe religion in non-realist terms. More importantly, however, I have attempted to bring out the reality of our moral existence. Weil, though perhaps appearing as an idealist, seems to me to reveal the deeply concealed truth that our intentions are never as pure as we believe them to be. Her ability to recognize that an ethic of the other requires first an understanding of who we are and what we can do (both destructively and constructively) compels me to think that the religious ethic she provides is more profound than any postmodern variety of other-centered ethics.

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