

## LOVE'S WEAKNESS

LOVE'S WEAKNESS: SIMONE WEIL AND THE TRUTHFUL ENCOUNTERING  
OF OTHERS

BY GERALD ENS, B.A. (HONOURS)

A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

McMaster University © Copyright by Gerald Ens, September 2017

McMaster University MASTER OF ARTS (2017) Hamilton, Ontario (Religious Studies)

TITLE: Love's Weakness: Simone Weil and the Truthful Encountering of Others

AUTHOR: Gerald Ens, B.A. (Canadian Mennonite University) SUPERVISOR: Professor

P. Travis Kroeker NUMBER OF PAGES: ix, 117

## LAY ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I present and examine Simone Weil's understanding of how we might avoid doing violence to other people and instead treat other people with love and compassion. The first chapter reads Weil together with Jean Vanier to examine the various ways that power and the attempt to dominate others dictates our relationships with others. In the second chapter I systematically present Weil's understanding of how we might, through a certain kind of personal death, transport ourselves wholly into the perspectives of other people and thereby practice true compassion towards them. In the third and concluding chapter I use Vanier's compelling presentation of human flourishing as consisting of heart-to-heart interdependent relationships to critique the refusal of being dependent on others that is both implicit and explicit in Weil's account of compassion.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a presentation and analysis of Simone Weil's articulation of the weakness of love vis-à-vis our encounters with others. It does so both as a way to better examine Christian theological claims about the importance of weakness and as a way of accessing the tensional depths of Simone Weil's work from an often neglected angle. To achieve this engagement, I read Weil alongside Jean Vanier, whose life and work share with Weil a profound emphasis on the centrality of weakness for meeting others truthfully and lovingly. In Chapter One I draw on both Weil and Vanier to present their shared critique of relationships that are reduced to a pursuit of power and influence over others. I call such relationships "territorial" because they posit human beings as competitors for two-dimensional territory and therefore envision human relationships in essentially competitive terms. Chapter Two is a detailed presentation of Weil's constructive work on the weakness of love that emphasizes her account of the impersonal, non-egoistic, and unattached relationships we ought to pursue with others. Weil claims that we experience the fullness of reality through an uncompromising embrace of all things, which we can only accomplish through the removal of ourselves in the face of others. We get concrete development of these themes in Weil's presentation of neighbour love and friendship, which she understands as a total openness to another's position, circumstance, and being. In the third chapter, I use the theme of communion in Vanier's work to call into question the way Weil demands our total surrender to the other. I suggest that an absent self cannot be truly weak and vulnerable before others. The central problem, I suggest, is a conception in which any sort of positive presence is necessarily an obstacle and any imposition of oneself necessarily competitive.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship which made it possible for me to work on this thesis.

My advisor, Dr. Travis Kroeker set me on the path of my engagement with Simone Weil and has supported me through the twists and turns of that journey. I want to thank Travis especially for his encouragement, critical engagements, and enthusiasm for my academic work and for his keen sense as an advisor for when either patient flexibility or gentle pressure best serves the situation. I also thank my other committee members, Dr. Dana Hollander and Dr. Peter Widdicombe, for their careful reading of this thesis and their at once challenging and generous comments and questions at the defense. Fellow students in the Religious Studies department have done much over the past two years to shape and challenge my thinking, offer encouragement for my work, provide close intellectual friendship in what is often a lonely discipline, and renew my passion for academic work and Christian theology. Of these many colleagues and friends I want to especially thank Zac Klassen, Max Kennel, and Caleb De Jong. Additionally, I want to thank Joel Peters for many years of exhilarating intellectual companionship. Joel read several chapter drafts, often on short notice, and reliably provided insightful comments and questions that have significantly improved the text of this thesis.

Finally, I owe more to Lisa Obirek than can be expressed in words. Thank you, Lisa, for your endless belief in me and in my work. Thank you for so often knowing better than I do what I think, for patiently letting me work out ideas with you, and for so

honestly challenging and engaging with me. Thank you most of all for your true love and friendship.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: Relations of Force in Simone Weil and Jean Vanier	9
False Greatness and the Sovereignty of Force	9
The Violence of Glory	14
Greatness as a Shield Against Others	17
Individual Competition and Social Belonging	22
Territorial Relationships	28
Conclusion: ‘After Death – Love’	35
CHAPTER TWO: Weil on Impersonal Relationships: Neighbour Love and Friendship	41
Part I: Impersonal Relationships	41
Part II.1: Neighbour Love	71
Part II.2: Friendship	82
Conclusion	95
CHAPTER THREE: Communion and the Presence of Others: A Critique of Simone Weil via Jean Vanier	98
Vanier on Communion	100
Considering Weil through the Lens of Communion	108



## ABBREVIATIONS

Simone Weil

- APP *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, trans. Simon Leys. New York: New York Review of Books, 2013.
- ER “Essay on the Notion of Reading,” trans. Rebecca Fine Rose and Timothy Tessin. *Philosophical Investigations*, 13/4 (1990).
- FLN *First and Last Notebook*, trans. Richard Rees. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- GG *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Iliad “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” in Simone Weil and Rachel Bespaloff, *War and the Iliad*, trans. Mary McCarthy. New York: New York Review of Books, 2005.
- LP *Letter to a Priest*. Toronto: Penguin, 2003.
- N *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, 2 volumes, trans. Arthur Wills. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956.
- NR *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002.
- SE *Selected Essays: 1934-1943*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- SNLG *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- WG *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Crauford. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.

Jean Vanier

- BH *Becoming Human*. Toronto: Anansi, 1998.
- CG *Community and Growth*, revised edition. New York: Paulist Press, 1989.

SS     *The Scandal of Service: Jesus Washes our Feet.* Toronto: Novalis, 1996.

### Introduction

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a parable of a wealthy man who leaves three servants with different sums of money before leaving on a journey. The two who have been given more (five and two ‘talents,’ respectively) “put their money to work” (v. 26) and double their money. The third hides his single talent in a hole in the ground. When, “after a long time,” (v. 19) the servants’ master returns, he praises and rewards the servants who have doubled his holdings, putting them “in charge of many things” (v. 21). When the third servant returns the single talent to his master, the master flies into a rage and has the servant thrown “outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 30). The master explains his actions in what is often taken to be the moral of the story (though Jesus is still speaking ‘in character’ as the master): “Everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (v. 29).

In conventional interpretations, this parable provides us with a lesson in stewardship.<sup>1</sup> God is the all-powerful owner of all things, but while he is away he charges us with the efficient management of his assets and holdings. It is common for this parable to be utilized in order to encourage people to put their wealth to good use, maximizing the gain – e.g., church growth, the alleviation of poverty, evangelism – they can achieve with their profit. But perhaps even more often “God’s” assets and holdings are interpreted

---

<sup>1</sup> This parable’s popularity is a relatively modern phenomenon and emerges alongside the also relatively modern popularity of the theological theme of stewardship, which in turn, and non-coincidentally, rose to prominence alongside the establishment of capitalist economies in Europe and North America. See Kelly Johnson, *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), chap. 3 and 5 for a probing overview and incisive critique of stewardship ethics in Christian theology.

in terms of the various competencies and abilities (usually called “gifts”) a person may have, with the lesson being that we must put these competencies to use in order to positively influence events, leveraging what we can of ourselves in service to God. In addition to helping us sidestep some of the harsh words and uncomfortable phrasing in this parable, this interpretation leaves conventional economies of power fully intact, with only the additional suggestion that we ought to exercise this power for some good purpose (which in this parable, at least, is defined as making a good return to the master).

In her study of the place of beggars in Christian theology, Kelly Johnson points out that there is another way to read this parable.<sup>2</sup> She draws our attention to the fact that the master in this parable looks like an example of the brutal tyranny of absentee landowners – he even admits to being “a hard man” who harvests what he has not sown (v. 24, 26) – that Jesus’s audience would have been all too familiar with. No just ruler would have commended usury – the master states that “you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest” (v. 27) – a practice which is explicitly prohibited in the Biblical tradition. Johnson further alludes to the fact that this owner represents the transfer of wealth from landed property held (in small plots) by many to disposable wealth held by a few, a trend (as pervasive in the Ancient Middle East as in our time) that the Biblical law warns against and the prophets condemn. As Johnson comments, “if money were fruitful, then planting it in the ground would have led to increase.”<sup>3</sup> We might further note the

---

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *The Fear of Beggars*, 198-199. See also Ched Meyers and Eric DeBode, “Towering Trees and ‘Talented Slaves,’” *The Other Side*, 35, no. 3 (1999): 11-17 and Thomas Y. Neufeld, *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 174-176.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *The Fear of Beggars*, 199.

proximity of the parable, in Matthew's gospel, to Jesus's arrest, trial, and execution (in chapters 26-27), during which a man who does not have (cf. Matt. 8:20) is stripped naked and hung to die on a cross, even what little he has taken away from him. In other words, it is the cast off servant who figures as Christ, who suffers at the hand of the powerful for refusing to play by their rules.

If this interpretation is right, this parable abruptly pushes us into the stark fullness of the importance of weakness in Christian theology, with all of its strangeness, a theme that has often been neglected or distorted. As Johnson argues, this parable shows God to be a stranger to the "powerful one" who lends us resources to use for the sake of this power; God, instead, appears to us as a beggar and in doing so reveals to us what love is.<sup>4</sup> This parable disrupts our understandings about the fruitfulness of power, whether it be power in wealth, strength, competency, or influence. It poses to us the baffling claim that the one who refuses to have anything to do with his (or her) 'talent' and as a result is cast off into suffering exile is, in itself and not because of something else that it accomplishes, the true embodiment of charity. The claim is that we best love others out of our impoverishment.

I begin with this parable and its dramatic portrayal of weakness because I know of few thinkers who have examined the centrality of weakness to love, in both writing and in life, with as much rigor, detail and breadth, and sustained attention and emphasis as Simone Weil. Though her writing (much of which is posthumously published notes and

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 199.

fragments) is often difficult, dense, and even cryptic, the demands she places on us to give ourselves to others and to God in absolute weakness are precise and exacting. The subtlety and scrutiny by which she unearths the refuges of power and strength we hide within and mask with supposed love and generosity likewise leaves us with no recourse when it comes to embracing the weakness of the one thrown into exile and death.

This thesis provides a presentation and analysis of Simone Weil's articulation of the weakness of love vis-à-vis our encounters with others and otherness. It does so both as a way to: 1) better understand and examine Christian theological claims about the importance of weakness; and 2) as a way of accessing the tensional yet often illuminating depths of Simone Weil's work from a too often neglected angle.

On the second point, much of the work on Weil's understanding of love and weakness, helpful though much of it is, wants to proceed rather quickly to social and political theology and philosophy and metaphysics, glossing over the deeply personal and detailed emphasis in Weil's work on our encounters with and approach to others via neighbor love and friendship; her work on friendship in particular is almost routinely overlooked. Furthermore, much of this work emphasizes only Weil's social critiques of the pervasive presence of oppression in society or only her work on the sacrificial nature of love, failing to recognize the extent to which these are bound together for Weil.

On the first point, Christian theology's promotion of various kinds of weakness and servanthood often masks and enables non-costly machinations for power. Those treatments that do manage to envision weakness *as* weakness often consist primarily of negative gestures away from power and lack a robust constructive vision. Simone Weil's

extensive treatment of the various dimensions of the weakness by which we might truthfully and lovingly encounter others offers an opportunity to more richly confront and understand Christian theological claims about weakness. In this way we can find Weil's work helpful not only in her astute critiques of power and her most illuminating gestures towards a fully-weak love but also in those areas in which her thought exhibits tensions and where I think she is wrong. That is, her work affords us the opportunity of a detailed and nuanced effort at constructing an account of love and weakness.

To achieve this kind of engagement with Simone Weil, I read her with the help of Jean Vanier. Like Weil, Vanier's life and work contain a profound emphasis on the centrality of weakness for meeting others truthfully and lovingly; in particular the two thinkers share a remarkably similar critique of the various uses and modalities of conventional power. Reading Vanier together with Weil, as I do in Chapter One, helps to develop and elaborate Weil's ideas. For example, Vanier's detailed descriptions of why we protect ourselves from others and what we are protecting ourselves from when we shield ourselves against others, helps to illuminate Weil's evocative but dense arguments that we must strip off our armour and expose ourselves to others, the world, and God. Reading Vanier against Weil, as I do in Chapter Three as the substance of my evaluative engagement with her, allows for a substantive, nuanced, and detailed analysis of what it means to be weak and vulnerable in the face of others.

In Chapter One I draw on both Weil and Vanier to present their shared critique of relationships based on and driven by force. These are relationships that are reduced to a

pursuit of power and influence over others. Weil and Vanier reveal a number of often subtle varieties of the quest for domination, including a kind of weakness and sacrifice performed for the purpose of increasing one's influence and standing (even in death) and a kind of submissive belonging to a person, group, or idea that seeks strength in this belonging. I here emphasize both thinkers' observation that both the individual and collective pursuit of greatness and glory constitute a competitive pursuit of domination over others. Drawing on Weil and Vanier, I call relationships of force "territorial" because they posit human beings as competitors for two-dimensional territory (which includes ourselves and others) and therefore posit human relationships in essentially competitive terms. Both Weil and Vanier suggest that we can escape this paradigm of relating to others through an embrace of that genuine weakness which is love for others. I therefore conclude this chapter with their critique of charity performed from a position of strength, but note that their constructive work on love's weakness is where their thought begins to diverge.

Chapter Two is a detailed presentation of Weil's constructive work on the weakness of love and specifically her understanding of how we ought to conduct our relationships with others. There are two main sections. The first takes a more general look at Weil's proposals for how we ought to relate to each other, which I gather together under the title *impersonal relationships*. Weil's understanding of the impersonal, non-egoistic relationships we ought to pursue stems from her critique of attachments to other people; she argues that attachments always contain some aspect of our personal being and therefore are always mired in the forceful – and therefore violent – imposition of



ourselves onto others. In contrast, she proposes that we experience the fullness of reality through a loving and uncompromising embrace of all things, which we can only accomplish through the removal of ourselves. In this way, we can stand in others' perspectives and through a composition of these perspectives come to a fully compassionate apprehension of all reality. The second section looks in turn at Weil's specific articulations of *neighbor love* and then *friendship*. Picking up on the themes I address in the first section, neighbor love represents, for Weil, one's total openness to another's position, circumstances, and being. Weil argues that when we are fully aware of the existence of specific others in this way we cannot help but act compassionately towards them. She further argues that when we fully recognize and receive the existence of the weak and vulnerable, we offer them a new personhood and being. Weil's writings on friendship are among the most difficult and inconsistent in her corpus, and perhaps for this reason have rarely been treated. Nevertheless, it is a definite emphasis in her work and was an important aspect of her life. If we are to understand Weil's thinking on how we can and should encounter others, we must come to terms with what she says about friendship. Gathering together a number of her different arguments concerning friendship, I emphasize the themes of restraint, withdrawal, and appreciation from a distance. In her work on friendship, I find, Weil suggests that we find true closeness with another in our own absence.

In the third chapter, I return to Vanier so as to critically engage with Weil's constructive account of the weakness of love. This engagement hangs upon Vanier's central concept of communion: the interdependence that forms in the exchange of love

between people who are vulnerable before one another. Vanier's presentation of communion, in which the self must be vulnerably present in order to receive particular others and in order to give itself as a particular content-filled being, calls into question the way Weil demands our total surrender to the other. Or rather, Vanier helps us to see that total and perfect self-surrender is not in conflict with the ongoing presence of the self, offered as a vulnerable gift, and realized, in its full weakness, as a part of an active relationship. Using Vanier, I question whether a self that is absent, or "decreated," to use Weil's term, can in fact be weak and vulnerable before others, its nothingness being in one sense perfectly inviolable. The central problem, I suggest, is a conception in which any sort of positive presence is necessarily an obstacle and any imposition necessarily competitive. To find a more embodied account of weakness, in contrast, requires the ongoing vulnerability of people who give themselves to one another so as to grow together in love.

## Chapter One

### Relations of Force in Simone Weil and Jean Vanier

These are not good times for truthful encounters with others and otherness. Shut up in enclaves with people who have the same beliefs, interests, and ways of life as we do, two options seem readily available: the fetishization of difference that so often coincides with a facile celebration of bland differences and tepid solidarity or else the rabid fear of ‘the other’ that we witness in nostalgic appeals to an infantile nationalism. Neither option allows for truthful encounters with others; both feed the sense of alienation that is widespread in our societies. In this chapter, I will use Simone Weil and Jean Vanier to diagnose the mechanisms that keep us insulated from others, namely their shared critique of the competitive quest for an illusory greatness, which, they argue, is a major part of what inhibits our ability to form relations of compassion and generosity with others.

#### **False Greatness and the Sovereignty of Force**

In *The Need for Roots* (1943), Weil argues that of all the obstacles that “separate us from a civilization likely to be worth something,” our false “conception of greatness is the most serious defect of all” (NR 216-217). For both Weil and Vanier, this dominant paradigm of greatness is an often subtle (as we will see) mastery and domination over others. Such greatness, Weil elaborates, finds its foundations in the apparent sovereignty of “blind mechanical force” over all phenomena (NR 11). For if force is the only way that bodies (human or non-human) relate to each other then we will measure our success by how effectively we wield force; bowing to the sovereignty of force we will (and do) seek

to manipulate the movements of others and avoid being manipulated ourselves. Speaking specifically to human relations, Weil argues that force manifests as “that  $x$  that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*” (Iliad 3).<sup>5</sup> She repeatedly stresses this point, describing the means by which the strong are able to totally obliterate the weak and eradicate their personality: “the man wills and the matter submits. The weak are like things. There is no difference between throwing a stone to get rid of a troublesome dog and saying to a slave: ‘Chase that dog away’” (WG 87; cf. SE 27).

Weil finds an unusually unabashed articulation of this sentiment in the Athenians’ address to the city of Methos before utterly destroying it. To the men of Methos’ appeal to justice, the Athenians responded: “ ‘Each one commands wherever he has power’” (WG 86). Weil sees the same clear-sighted depravity in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and claims that the Nazis’ “coherent lie” that force rules all relations was able to vanquish the French “incoherent lie” that force rules all natural phenomena but that justice ought to rule human relations when, in fact, we are also “made of flesh and blood” (NR 238). Vanier frequently describes and critiques a similar paradigm of success with the terminology of competition. He argues that the dual emphasis in our culture on individual self-sufficiency and material gain turns our societies into “places of harsh competition and struggle, where each person tries to have more money, more influence, more power. Everyone has to win, whether it be at work, in school, in sports, or even in relationships” (SS 56). Our pride and our fear of others, he argues, leads to our desire “to dominate, to

---

<sup>5</sup> Weil’s remarkable essay on the Iliad is one of Weil’s most striking and persuasive accounts of force and the way that “the human spirit is...modified by its relations with force,...swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle,...deformed by the weight of the force it submits to” (ibid.). For further reading on Weil’s mechanics of force, see Henry L. Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, ed. Martin Andic (New York: Continuum, 2001), chap. 6.

be superior and to control,” jealously guarding our position against others (CG 216). In our need to win, we accept such mechanical force as the only paradigm of relationship between objects; we measure greatness by such ability to successfully practice this imposition of our will. Weil’s opposition to this competitive paradigm is, for example, much of the basis for her critique of human rights. She notes that the language of rights posits an essentially competitive framework, reducing genuine violations “into a shrill nagging of claims and counter-claims, which is both impure and impractical” (SE 21).<sup>6</sup> Rights are something we possess and must employ against others, and thus, in Richard Bell’s words, “to have bought into rights language is to believe that power can be counter-balanced by power.”<sup>7</sup> Is it any wonder, then, that the rhetoric of rights seems so often to work far more effectively for the protection of the propertied interests of the wealthy and powerful than for the protection of the vulnerable?<sup>8</sup>

In a letter, Weil says that the abuse she has often received when she has made herself vulnerable to others is a result not of any particular malice, but “of the well-known phenomenon that makes hens rush upon one of their number if it is wounded, attacking and pecking it” (WG 46). This example helps us to further see the extent to which Weil (and Vanier) believe that a rivalrous model of relationships is engrained in our thought and action; it is, Weil states, “a mechanical necessity” that the strong will

---

<sup>6</sup> One of her most powerful examples of this point is the way that the cry of a young girl forced into prostitution echoes, when boxed into the language of rights, as if it were the same as the objection of a farmer unable to sell his eggs at a fair price (SE 21).

<sup>7</sup> Richard H. Bell, “Reading Simone Weil on Rights, Justice, and Love,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 218.

<sup>8</sup> Though I am not aware of any explicit critique of rights in his writings, Vanier also avoids the language of rights, despite working with a group of people whose rights are routinely violated across the globe. He prefers the language of human beauty, human pain, human need, and human responsiveness.

impose their will to the extent that it is possible (WG 86).<sup>9</sup> Vanier observes that from an early age we learn to secure our own place by keeping others in their place through oppression and exploitation; we seek to enhance ourselves vis-à-vis others by “depriving them of...a fully human life” (SS 56). At its most successful, we get a false sense of divinity – it makes us feel as though we are on top – when we exercise force over others. Weil accordingly observes that violence satisfies lust as readily as sex, granting us the control and possession that we feel is a self-enhancement (LP 15). She argues that this is because domination in all its subtle and overt forms is the drug that makes us feel we can transcend the limits to which we are subjected as material beings (the most significant of which is death). As she puts it elsewhere,

There are no other restraints upon our will than material necessity and the existence of other human beings around us. Any imaginary extension of these limits is seductive, so there is a seduction in whatever helps us to forget the reality of the obstacles [namely, by dominating those obstacles who are human beings]. That is why upheavals like war and civil war are so intoxicating; they empty human lives of their reality and seem to turn people into puppets. That is also why slavery is so pleasant to the masters. (SE 11)<sup>10</sup>

Weil and Vanier identify a further element to our nearly automatic pursuit of transcendence through domination in the reactionary defense mechanisms with which we seek to disguise our weaknesses and wounds from ourselves and from others. Analyzing the inability of Jesus’s disciples to understand and receive Jesus’s message of love, Vanier states that “we are all deeply wounded in our capacity for relationship and love; we are so frightened of others, and especially frightened of difference. How quickly we

---

<sup>9</sup> Weil describes the same example of hens attacking one of the wounded members as a “phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation” (WG 71).

<sup>10</sup> Weil believes that this “false divinity” we receive in destruction is even more potent in the case of the destruction of social entities. See N 270.

try to control others and thus wound them and crush their freedom” (SS 40). Hence, Vanier claims that those who exercise abusive authority – who treat authority as “mere power” and take pleasure in having this kind of authority – do so as an attempt to compensate for a lack of strength (SS 42). As he puts it, “we over-identify with our position. *If we lose it or if we no longer have power, it is as if we no longer exist....* We hide [our weaknesses] behind our role” (SS 42-43, Vanier’s emphasis). The same mechanism governs what Weil calls a transference of suffering, whereby we seek to compensate for pain inflicted upon us by hurting others (she relates wanting to strike people in the middle of the forehead when she suffered from headaches).<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, Weil finds in her study of history that the most tyrannical nations (particularly the Romans and, as she calls them, the Hebrews) come from a history of being traumatized and enslaved; as she concludes: “Whoever is uprooted himself [sic] uproots others” (NR 48). This, then, informs Weil’s suspicion of any form of justice or revolution that would simply ‘flip the tables’ on the oppressed (e.g., N 53).

Effectively describing how we have bowed to the sovereignty of force in our past, Weil claims that our history is “the history of the servitude which makes men [sic] – oppressor and oppressed alike – the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured, and thus reduces living humanity to being the chattel of inanimate chattel.”<sup>12</sup> Here Weil powerfully proclaims the falsity of the belief that we can

---

<sup>11</sup> See N 122: “Human mechanics: Whoever is suffering seeks to communicate his suffering –either by ill-treating another or by provoking pity – so as to lessen it, and it really does lessen it in this way.” See also pp. 153 and 158.

<sup>12</sup> Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 69.

secure ourselves by force – even within the terms of force.<sup>13</sup> Vanier, likewise, rightly notes that history’s most apparent lesson to us should be that power is temporary and is not inherited by right (BH 75).<sup>14</sup> We cannot escape force, no matter how effectively we wield it. It may be true, as Weil remarks, that the reason killing is so “intoxicating [is] because we feel ourselves to be delivered from the death that we inflict”; but it is certain that such a feeling is inaccurate (N 217). Furthermore, the more that we employ force (and thus tacitly accept its dominion) the more that we unconsciously accept its domination over us; by embracing it we take our place as inert matter under its sway and allow its intoxicating effects to dictate our actions: when we are possessed by force, Weil points out, “words are as powerless [over us] as over matter itself...[and we] become deaf and dumb” (Iliad 26; cf. pp. 11, 14, and 20) In short, “to the same degree...those who use [force] and those who endure it are turned to stone” (Iliad 26).

### **The Violence of Glory**

Attentive to the fact that our quest for mastery is about securing and promoting ourselves, both Weil and Vanier explore at length the psychological and spiritual dimensions of competitive relationships, looking specifically at our “desire to gain prestige” and glory as a means to “com[e] out on top” (CG 16). That is, one way to prove ourselves, to assert our uniqueness and individuality over and against others, is “to seek recognition” from them and to gain their admiration (SS 57). In a competitive world,

---

<sup>13</sup> I develop some of Weil and Vanier’s alternatives to the sovereignty of force in chapters two and three; the point here is that we need not accept these to see force’s futility. See also SNLG 158-159.

<sup>14</sup> Vanier connects this fact to “the necessity of service and humility” if we are to live truthfully.



success is recognition, to the extent that, as Vanier claims, we have a tremendous “fear...of not existing if we are not held in esteem” (SS 67).<sup>15</sup>

We often disguise the pursuit of glory and give it further momentum with some purportedly good cause, such as justice (as Weil believes is the case with the most participants in the French resistance), creative artistry, or scientific knowledge. However, Weil and Vanier work to see through these guises and contend that, even in these forms, the pursuit of glory is parasitic on society, community, and the individual soul (e.g., NR 173-174). This is because it is our “need to be more important than others” that animates the pursuit of glory (SS 57). Thus, Vanier suggests that the violence, fear, and abuse that our world is so full of stems from this competitive tendency “to reduce being human to acquiring knowledge, power, and social status” (BH 78). The very point of the pursuit of glory is to divide, to secure oneself against others.

Glory provides and instrumentalizes an aura of legitimacy and virtue to the ego’s quest for domination over others. Many of Weil’s critiques of the pursuit of glory effectively expose the ways that we make use of apparent weakness, vulnerability, and noble sacrifice as part of the competitive quest for personal glory. One way that Weil illustrates this point is by noting the fact that people have often found it easy to die in the service of a glorious cause; this is because we accumulate more in personal status via ‘sacrifice’ for an admired cause than we lose in status by the loss of our life.<sup>16</sup> Even the

---

<sup>15</sup> See also CG 217: “We are afraid for our very existence if we do not win the vote, or a certain position. We are so quick to equate function with person, and popularity with quality of being.”

<sup>16</sup> Weil outlines this argument numerous times in her writing. See, e.g., GG 62-63: “The militiamen of the ‘Spanish Testament’ who invented victories in order to endure death.... Although we should gain nothing by the victory, we can bear to die for a cause which is going to triumph, not for one which will be defeated.... The thought of death calls for a counterweight, and this counterweight – apart from grace –

(short-term) defeat of the cause we die for is unimportant, so long as we have the belief that history will provide us with the ultimate victory of vindicating our cause as just, noble, heroic, or significant; to the extent that it adds to the drama and heroics of our action, we may even prefer noble defeat. Vanier describes a similar impulse when he writes about how we want to appear as a “perfect hero,” totally in control of our own limitless capacity for virtue, and insulated from others by a total self-identification with our noble role (CG 178).

What Weil and Vanier think we find far more difficult to bear is a descent into genuine littleness and anonymity. Weil in particular reveals how difficult we find it to face sacrifice, defeat, and death as a part of an anonymous, forgotten, or discredited cause; and thus in the face of such anonymity we will supply ourselves with revenge fantasies of historical prestige. One of her favourite examples is the manner by which the early martyrs, convinced of Christ’s return in glory and retribution, faced death gladly while Christ’s own disciples, “when Christ had *only* been an absolutely pure being,” could not bear to stand by him as he died the death of a slave; likewise, Jesuit priests, “sustained by the temporal grandeur of the Church” could withstand seemingly unbearable torture (NR 218, my emphasis). To quote her in full:

Those who have been defeated often benefit from a sentimentalism...but only those defeated provisionally. Affliction confers an immense prestige so long as it is accompanied by strength. The affliction of the [truly] weak is not even an object of attention – when, indeed, it is not an object of repulsion.... The heroic resistance of the vanquished is admired when time brings with it a certain revenge, not otherwise. (NR 217-218)

---

cannot be anything but a lie.... Compensations. Marius imagined future retribution. Napoleon dreamed of posterity. William II wanted a cup of tea. His imagination was not strongly enough attached to power to be able to span the years.” See also p. 110; N 148, 166.

And so, Weil concludes, this motivation for our weakness and sacrifice, far from representing an escape from the paradigm of competition and domination, demonstrates our acceptance of the axiom that “there is no other force on this earth except force” (NR 218).<sup>17</sup>

### **Greatness as a Shield against Others**

Weil describes our false conception of greatness as an “armour [that] prevents pain from entering the soul” (NR 224). Elsewhere she writes: “The human being modifies itself under affliction in such a way as to preserve itself as much as possible, in such a way as to leave the centre inviolate – that centre through which grace could pass” (N 79-80). She does not explain either of these dense statements, but they appear to be getting at the deleterious manner by which the idol of greatness protects us from contact with the difficulty of the world. Truthful encounters with the wildness of a world and of people who are resolutely other to us – at once too close to us and too distant – are difficult and frightening. We thus, Vanier notes, hide who we are “behind words, ideas, [our] function and [our] authority” (SS 4; see CG 227). Pursuing the markers of success of this world,

---

<sup>17</sup> In his essay on Augustine’s *City of God*, Robert Dodaro takes a similar line of argument a step further, pointing out that the political pursuit of personal glory is both a common and insidious way of grasping after an illusory immortality, of gaining life after death through the praise of others. He further argues that this personal glory is the deception at the core of our political legitimation. “For the Augustine of the *City of God*, empire maintenance, with the attendant subjection of peoples and the religious, intellectual, and cultural props which legitimate it is the most grotesque social manifestation of this fear of death. However, just as the objective evil which empires sustain has to be veiled from the view of its practitioners, so too must the fear of death which motivates empire maintenance be veiled from the view of all concerned.... In all cases, for Augustine the principal clue to the denial of death at the base of political deception is the telltale presence of a rhetoric of glory” (Robert Dodaro, “Eloquent Lies, Just Wars and the Politics of Persuasion: Reading Augustine’s *City of God* in a ‘Postmodern’ World” *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), 89-90).

insubstantial as they may be, provide effective bulwarks against such difficult and uncomfortable encounters. Weil's way of putting this point is, again, salient and evocative: "Suffering causes time and space to enter into the body. What Satan offered was imaginary. Riches and power are imaginary. Imaginary suits of armour" (N 221).

Vanier can help us to extract at least two concrete points from these statements about our defensive stance towards the world. First, it seems that Weil is stating that the brute forces of the world (and perhaps especially other people) have a tremendous capacity to hurt us when we are unguarded, when we truthfully reveal ourselves and attempt to look truthfully at the world and others around us. Vanier writes that when we are open to others we "see their wounds and their pain" and this makes us "very vulnerable and terribly poor"; for we then receive and bear this woundedness (CG 29). We enter into and share another's journey of pain and suffering, which can mark us deeply and even overwhelm us. Looking at it from the opposite direction, Vanier tells us – here he draws from his deep experience of meeting and working with many people with intellectual disabilities who have been cruelly cast off – that it is a real rejection (often as children) and sense of not having been loved (when we were most vulnerable) that creates the wounds of anguish we try to cover up (e.g., SS 57 and CG 6). We can infer from this that when we truthfully meet others we open ourselves to being despised and rejected or used and manipulated in ways that can be deeply damaging.<sup>18</sup> Recalling Weil's claims about the ability of force to utterly rob us of our person, we can see that, for her at least, there is a genuine basis for our fear of truthful contact with the world and

---

<sup>18</sup> See in regards to this point Vanier's reading of the on the Man of Sorrows in Isaiah in SS 34-35.

our desire to guard ourselves by joining in the defensive competition for greatness (though whether this justifies such behavior is another question).<sup>19</sup> Vanier tells us that often when people who have spent a long time in a L'Arche community return to their families, they are dismayed to find themselves being unexpectedly aggressive; but he points out that this aggression makes sense “because they have been stripped of much of their personal armour by being in community; they cannot live so openly with people who do not respect their vulnerability” (CG 49).

The second point is that we are equally, if not moreso, terrified of the truth and grace that others bring.<sup>20</sup> Commenting on Weil's understanding of force, Henry Finch observes that “prestige is intimately connected with the defense and promotion of the human *ego*.”<sup>21</sup> When we genuinely meet others we open ourselves up to truth in the form of difference, failure, and loss among other things that threaten our self-security (see BH 73-83). Vanier points out that it is precisely because community is “a place of relationships” that it can be a “terrible” and “painful” place: “our limitations, our fears and [the extent of] our egoism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective or sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy” (CG 25-26). We discover how much of

---

<sup>19</sup> This is one of the reasons why both Weil and Vanier are so insistent that, left to our own devices, we will not be able to escape the dominion of egoistic force in human relations (see, e.g., CG 38-41 and 157-160).

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that these two types of pain are much more closely linked to each for Weil than they are for Vanier (though for Vanier they are not entirely separate either). At a number of moments Weil appears to erase any distinction between genuine and deleterious violence done to our being and a painful but truthful encounter that jars us out of illusion; indeed, she often argues that, when seen with the right perspective, we can equally well put to good use any and all “affliction” that we encounter. See, e.g., WG, 67-82 and 99-117.

<sup>21</sup> Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, 65.

our desire to love is rooted our desire to be “seen as unique,” rather than a desire to be in true solidarity with others (CG 14). Vanier’s observation here is that the fantasies we weave to hide our weaknesses from ourselves fall to pieces when we are in close proximity to other people, when other people are regularly dependent on us and when we find ourselves dependent on others; when the call to love greatly is not abstract, but meets real people, we learn all the ways that we are incapable of loving and living generously (see SS 3). As Vanier notes, we “live in illusions...as we shut ourselves off from others” (CG 134).

Our fear of the truth and grace another brings to us extends beyond the revelation of our faults. For to meet grace in another person is encounter an invitation “to become more”; grace calls for and enables a transformed existence (CG 23). Whether it be through forgiveness, kindness, a cry for help,<sup>22</sup> or some other gracious act, the other looks at us and sees a being more capable of love than we had known possible. However, Vanier finds that our reaction to such grace is often uncomfortable defensiveness or outright hostility. He recalls an incident in Paris when a dishevelled woman recently released from a psychiatric hospital accosted him, asking for money. Frightened and already late for a meeting, Vanier tells us that he broke off their conversation, giving her a little money before leaving. He reflects:

I suspect that we exclude [the outcast] because we are frightened that our hearts will be touched if we enter into a relationship with him. If we listen to his story and hear his cry of pain we will discover that he is a human being. We might be touched by his broken heart and by his misfortunes. What happens when our hearts are touched? We might want to do something to comfort and help him, to

---

<sup>22</sup> Hearing the cry of the afflicted – “why am I being hurt?” – is, for Weil, the starting point of any just society. See SE 10-13 and 23-25.

alleviate his pain, and where will that lead us? As we enter into dialogue with a beggar, we risk entering into an adventure. Because [the outcast] needs not only money but also a place to stay, medical treatment, maybe work, and, even more, he needs friendship. (BH 70-71)

The grace that we discover in truthful encounters with another is terrifying, particularly when that person is an outcast; Vanier says that we are “frightened of our own hearts,” afraid of admitting that we desire to love and be loved (BH 73; cf. CG 134-139). Truthfully meeting the grace of another threatens to throw our comfortable routines, relationships, moralities, and apathies – “the rich person within us” – into disarray (CG 98). This grace calls us to let go of our “possessions and power..., cultural and material comforts..., and firm beliefs,” all of which give us security and self-satisfaction (SS 65-66). If we accept this grace “we will lose a certain freedom and control over our own lives. We will know loss and grief and will have to let go of some of our own ideas” (SS 66). The security of our identity is at stake, for the self as it is, with all its “selfishness and...hardness of...heart,” cannot survive such an encounter; we will be changed as “we keep walking towards an ever greater human insecurity” (CG 98 and 138). And, as we have already seen, opening ourselves up to more loving encounters with others opens us up to failure, injury, and further change and disruption. Thus Weil, commenting on our resistance to genuine repentance, writes that “there is a certain instinct of self-preservation which encourages us to remain as we are, which rejects progress. It makes us flee the light, because the light effects changes (N 269-270).

In sum, we fear to truthfully meet others because they may hurt us or they may at once expose our frailties and reveal our deep capacities for love; both of the latter revelations are difficult and demand genuine vulnerability to the violence of the world.

And so, afraid of the hurt, truth, and grace that others might bring to us, we erect an armour of competition. Our idolization of greatness allows us to block out – compete with rather than receive – the otherness of others which coincides with truth's emerging.

### **Individual Competition and Social Belonging**

An irony of the competitive striving to assert individuality is that it entails a certain subservience to a social identity. Weil points out that “the collective is the object of all idolatry.... In the case of avarice: gold [and money] is of the social order. In the case of ambition: power is of the social order. Science and art are full of the social element also” (GG 216). Her point is that the conventional markers of success are *conventions*, fictions manufactured by the social imagination. This is why she states that “prestige, which is [social] illusion, is of the very essence of power” (SE 168). The social imagination confers prestige, which is what codifies and facilitates the arbitrary distribution and use of power. This means that submission to homogenous collective values is implicit in any pursuit of glory, which explains how susceptible both the world of science and art (to continue with her examples) are to fads and trendiness. It is in line with this argument that Weil exposes the ironic idolatry at the source of our society's celebration of strong personalities and ‘geniuses’; for those artists and writers who seek personal glory in their art and envision “their art as the manifestation of their personality...are in fact the most in bondage to public taste” (SE 15). It is, likewise, a social idolatry to believe that (and, more importantly, to behave as though) work



produces money rather than goods or to believe that gold has inherent value (beyond, of course, the value to human ends of its colour, malleability, and so forth) (see N 78).<sup>23</sup>

For Vanier, this organization of our lives around these abstract societal symbols of accomplishment and power is one reason why we, as collectives and individuals, find meeting adults with intellectual disabilities so uncomfortable: “When we have constructed our lives around particular values of knowledge, power, and social esteem, it is difficult for us to accept those who cannot live by the same set of values” (BH 77). Vanier pushes us to recognize that the position of a person on the social scale dictates how we perceive him or her, not only in the terms of the more obvious markers of cultural currency, political influence, and material wealth, but also in terms of the competencies, moralities, and intelligences that our society privileges, especially our narratives of self-sufficiency and self-empowerment, as well as our privileging of capacity for production over capacity for love.<sup>24</sup> Vanier points out that these judgements “according to concepts of power and knowledge” do not merely put us into competition

---

<sup>23</sup> Henry Finch explains the connection Weil makes between the sort of social idolatry and social abstraction present in money and industrialized labour and her critique of algebra in a way that illuminates and explains her social critique. “In algebra [the problem] is the process of symbolization itself, proliferating like an independent power, developing for its own sake and getting further and further away from any human meaning.... What we call ‘information’ is a good example. Information is quantitative order, entirely apart from meaning, and, like computers, something to which it becomes harder and harder to give meaning.... We believe mistakenly that the value of an algebraic variable may represent a full concrete particular, whereas actually it is only an abstract representation.... Money...was originally an intermediary, but now like an algebraic symbol it has taken on a life of its own. We have the phenomenon of money generating money and, even more oddly, money itself becoming irrelevant and being replaced by credit, and by credit to the second or third degree. The effects are to produce unreality by separating human effort from its result.... Finally, there is...the machine, in which methodicalness escapes understanding and also assumes a life of its own.... [The modern machine’s] method is something we do not understand and do not need to understand. The result is to starve the worker intellectually and spiritually and above all to destroy the proper relation of mind and body” (Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, 20). Finch is primarily interpreting FLN 19-21.

<sup>24</sup> Simone Weil likewise points out that one’s social position and the social position of the other dictates the terms of any gift-giving and gratitude that occurs between the two. See N 129.

with others, but do so under the terms of a group ideology (and thereby identity) to which we (often unconsciously) subscribe; this practice of re-enacting our social belonging in this way, Vanier claims, makes “personal, heart to heart encounters” impossible (BH 83).

Given this inherent connection between social ideology and the individual pursuit of power and glory, it makes sense, as Weil and Vanier explore at length, that individualistic competition often manifests in a more straightforward belonging to explicit groups: from clubs to nations and religions. Our quest to be greater is a defense against encountering otherness, and nothing shields us from others quite so effectively as an easy belonging to a homogenous group. It seems that Weil is commenting on this when she writes: “‘We’ – collective feeling, false friendship, without harmony, because here the terms involved are of the same kind, the same origin, the same rank” (FLN 87).<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere she claims that “no crowd can conceive relationship” (GG 217).

Vanier’s description of certain kinds of friendships as “clubs of mediocrities” helps to elaborate on these remarks (CG 31). As he describes it, such friendships are “enclosed in mutual flattery and approval, preventing people from seeing their [or the other’s] inner poverty and wounds.... Friendship then becomes stifling, a barrier between ourselves and others and their needs. It becomes an emotional dependence which is a form of slavery” (CG 31-32). The name of the game is “seeking approval” and social groups and clubs provide for this; it is easy to win when we only relate to “those who look on us as winners” (BH 82, 78). We thus submit to a social group, hoping to secure

---

<sup>25</sup> For a similar statement by Vanier see BH 82: “As we become more conscious of the uniqueness of others, we become aware of our common humanity.”

our identity, status, and very existence in the strength of others who are part of the club, nation, religion, brand, or ideology. Collectivities exist for the illusory consolation and benefit of those inside of them (see GG 192-193 and NR 98ff). And so, in seeking to demonstrate our independence and individuality through ensuring others' approval, we become enslaved to others.

These 'mediocre friendships' are closely related to what Weil names as our temptation "to say with the dictators *I* with a collective signification" (WG 12, Weil's emphasis). She is, in other words, pointing to the way that we attempt to attain glory by an utter adherence to – indeed a submissive dissolution into – those lovers, personalities, or movements, etc. that appear strong and glorious (see N 279). In fact, Weil counterintuitively claims that this sort of adhesion is "the only case in which man is [truly] egoistic" (N 283). Here, as in many other places, Weil illustrates this point by pointing to the French soldiers' loyalty to Napoleon, which brought them nothing in practical terms, but provided an attachment to something glorious. Vanier, meanwhile, often looks to Peter in the gospels to make a similar point.<sup>26</sup> On Peter's refusal to allow Jesus to wash his feet, Vanier says that Peter followed Jesus because he appeared strong; Peter, he writes, was stuck within "a vision of politics and religion where the leader is on top, a rock that he could lean on and that gave security.... Because of his own limits and weaknesses, Peter needed a strong leader...., someone he could admire" (SS 69-70).

---

<sup>26</sup> Peter's denial is also a subject that Weil often returns to. Her interpretation is similar to Vanier's, even as she emphasizes Peter's mistaken trust in himself in a way that Vanier does not. See N 148: "Denial of St. Peter. To say to Christ: 'I will never deny thee' was to deny him already, for it was supposing the source of faithfulness to be in himself and not in grace.... It was difficult to be faithful to Christ. It was faithfulness in the void. Much easier to be faithful unto death to Napoleon. Much easier for the martyrs to be faithful, later on, because the Church was already there, a force, with temporal promises. We die for what is strong, not for what is weak; or at any rate for what, though momentarily weak, retains an aureole of strength."

Vanier connects this to Peter's denial of Jesus. It is not that Peter is a coward, he argues, for he was prepared to heroically defend Jesus with the sword. Instead, it is that Peter's hope and courage is connected to a submissive belonging to a strong Messiah that will accumulate glory; he breaks when Jesus refuses this mode of leadership in the face of both friends (when he washes the disciples' feet) and enemies (when he submits without resistance to execution). Peter cannot understand that Jesus is a vulnerable Messiah "who offers love and a heart-to-heart relationship"; to enter into this kind of relationship Peter must let go of his picture of Jesus as "an absolute...and all-powerful father- or mother-figure" (SS 72 and CG 5). Vanier summarizes this point well in another context, "We want ideal leaders who bring us security.... We look constantly for their approval.... And then, discontented with our own servility, we criticize them behind their back" (CG 235).

The flipside to Peter and Napoleon's soldier is Napoleon himself: the supposedly strong leader who wants authority for the honour and prestige that comes with it. Weil and Vanier argues that such a leader, "possessive and emotionally involved," is likewise dependent on the crowd, on his or her homogenous club of followers, through his or her jealousy (CG 221). Such a leader has placed her own worth in her authority over her followers, and thus needs them. In this way, "the slave is dependent on the master and the master on the slave" (GG 212). Finch nicely summarizes Weil's understanding of this egoistic mutual dependence: "There is a circle of illusion by which those who are important are sustained by the adulation of the others who are not, while these others derive their ego satisfaction from knowing the important ones."<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Finch, *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, 65.

It is worth further emphasizing Weil and Vanier's detailed articulation of the way that social groups shield individuals from any genuine encounter with others through an erasure of non-conforming perspectives. Weil is working from this impulse when she articulates her hesitation to be baptized. She writes that "the love of those things that are outside visible Christianity keeps me outside the Church" (WG 48). She says that she fears she will catch a blinding "Church patriotism" that would assimilate her to those within the Church and thereby cut her off from the insights and truths of those outside of it (WG 12; cf. 5-6, 13). Her overriding concern is that the "collective language" of social institutions functions through an unjust and absolute separation between those inside and outside of them (WG 35). Demonstrating the validity of this fear, Weil notes that there were some "Saints who approved of the Crusades or the Inquisition"; despite acknowledging their high spiritual nature, Weil, in the name of conscience, must declare them wrong in this regard. She continues: "If I think that on this point I see more clearly than they did, I must admit that in this matter they were blinded by something very powerful. This something was the Church seen as a social structure" (WG 12). In short, once we are inside of a patriotic group we and are unable to properly see people outside of that group to the point of eliminating them.

Implicit in this argument is the way that this sort of group belonging also separates us from those who are within the same group, with the group's homogeneity causing those on the inside to lose all capacity for independent thought. This is, for example, what Weil is getting when she writes of "the mysteries [of faith] inevitably degenerate[ing] into beliefs...in the Church [when] considered as a social organism," (N

284; cf. LP 39, 46, 60-62). Vanier nicely elaborates on this point, warning of the way that some communities try to suppress and manipulate the conscience, intelligence, and personality of individuals – especially “whatever is secret and intimate” – in the name of unity (CG 21). This sort of social unity, he argues, is based on “the fear of being yourself or finding yourself alone if you leave the others” (CG 21). Of course, when everyone is afraid of being themselves, nobody fosters or expresses perspectives or behaviours outside of the group orthodoxy. Thus, Vanier observes that this type of exclusionary community (a particular temptation, he thinks, for those groups that are issue-oriented) insulates us from others *both* inside and outside.

The difference between a community and a group that is only issue-oriented, is that the latter see the enemy outside the group. The struggle is an external one and there will be a winner and a loser. The group knows it is right and has the truth, and wants to impose it. The members of a [genuine] community [in contrast] know that the struggle is inside of each person and inside the community; it is against all the powers of pride and elitism, hate and depression that are there and which hurt and crush others, and which cause division and war of all sorts. (CG 29)

People on the outside are enemies; people on inside are conforming bodies, not unique persons with their own gifts and struggles. and this that boundary simultaneously enforces the absolute separation or absolute togetherness (it amounts to the same thing) of the individual members within a group.

### **Territorial Relationships**

I suggest that the language of territoriality provides an effective way to understand the vision of human relations that Weil and Vanier critique. Two remarks in Weil’s Marseille notebooks (1941-1942) evocatively suggest such language.

He who suspends gravity<sup>28</sup> over other people has a feeling of elevation. Illusion of elevation. False exaltation (power, murder, sexual possession)... Temptation to possess all worlds. (N 72)

Facile illusion, mistaking expansion for height, because in both cases wide spaces lie before one. (N 84)

Weil's point seems to be that, lacking an access to true inspiration and goodness (genuine greatness, perhaps?) we tend to provide ourselves with an illusion of this truth by expanding our domain horizontally, putting more and more territory under our influence. Another way that Weil describes this impulse is that, lacking a true perspective on and contact with reality, we seek to subordinate all reality to our ego-centric control over it, to erase all other perspectives so that our ego is all that remains.<sup>29</sup>

A helpful point here is Weil's intriguing argument that "evil...is monotonous; for," she explains, "everything has to be drawn from ourselves" (N 183; cf. pp. 140-141). Under the rules of egoistic territorial expansion, we are trapped within two-dimensional space.<sup>30</sup> When we think only of ourselves and our own advantage, we find ourselves "entirely subjected...to the compulsion exercised by [our] needs and to the mechanical play of forces" (NR 287). Trapped within our own self-expansion there is "nothing new; everything in it is *equivalent*"; there is no quality, beauty, higher form of being, or, indeed, reality (N 180). All that remains in this dimension is sheer quantity: the territory and things that we might (not) control and possess as our ego becomes all that (we think)

---

<sup>28</sup> Gravity and force signal similar mechanisms for Weil. See N 123: "Force is naturally below, towards the lower; gravity." And p. 186: "There is no other measurement for force than gravity. E.g. a magnet sustains a weight of so much, etc. A force is something which is able to balance gravity."

<sup>29</sup> See N 43: "To force somebody to read himself as you read him (slavery). To force others to read you as you read yourself (conquest)." See also pp. 24-26, 123 and WG 99-100.

<sup>30</sup> Weil describes the crimes committed in the course of such egoistic pursuits as "flat like dreams." Though the crimes indeed take place, they look like "mere acts of braggadocio." See N 160-161.

there is. The importance of money (and algebra) – the great leveller, which convert all quality into quantity – both indicates and re-inscribes our society’s subservience to this monotonous paradigm of competition for quantities (see N 146). Glory is likewise quantitative: it is something that we must attain more and more of so as to expand our influence. Weil’s words are striking in their directness: “It is because of this monotony that *quantity* plays such an enormous role. Lots of power, lots of kingdoms, lots of money, lots of women (Don Juan) or men (Celimene), etc. Condemnation to a false infinitude [i.e., endless self-expansion] – that is hell itself” (N 180).

If we connect Weil’s comments on horizontal growth and territorial thinking to her analysis of destructive relationships with others under the rule of force, we can observe that such relationships are likewise monotonous, stuck within a quantifying logic that can only conceive of endless possession by domination. Other people have no life or perspective to them; they are problems, mere obstacles on a grid, as they “are added to the ‘I’, to the things which one has at one’s disposal. There they figure in a quantitative form,” mere numbers in a giant but flat economic system of competition (N 182). We might say that when conceived of on a horizontal plane, what the other possesses I cannot possess and, if I am to possess something, the other cannot have it; the other’s contraction coincides with my expansion and the other’s expansion coincides with my contraction. We see this logic in Weil’s descriptions of relational economies of competition and reciprocity. “If...I do harm to another I receive something from him: what? What has one



gained...? One has enlarged, spread oneself” (N 181).<sup>31</sup> She similarly describes our warped understanding of justice and rights as an attempt to re-enact an imaginary, territorial balance through retribution and revenge.<sup>32</sup>

Vanier is making a complementary point when he repeatedly emphasizes that it is not through more knowledge, influence, ability, power or any other kind of acquisition that we will escape dominating patterns of relating to others. We deeply distrust suffering and admire success, security, and strength; yet, greater strength is not the answer for Vanier, even when it is (purportedly) in the service of good. Competence alone may allow us to efficiently take care of some physical needs, but it also causes us to “forget how to welcome and no longer see people with a handicap as a gift of God and a source of life” (CG 160). This is because such strength remains trapped in the same territorial conceptions of human relations, in which we can only see another in terms of causal influences of force: in this case, bodies to be kept alive, numbers to be served.

Looking at the glimpses we get in Weil’s writings of her political vision provides a helpful example for further understanding territorial relations. Describing her own country’s “thoroughly mediocre conception of national greatness,” Weil argues that post-revolution France failed to live up to its promise and “became just like any other nation,

---

<sup>31</sup> See also Arthur Wills’s translation of the same passage in GG 50: “To harm a person is to receive something from him. What? What have we gained...? We have gained in importance. We have expanded.”

<sup>32</sup> See N 139-140: “Gravity – The void (non-accepted) produces hatred, harshness, bitterness, malice. The evil one desires should happen to the thing one hates, and which one imagines, re-establishes the balance. The imagination (when uncontrolled) is a producer of a balanced state, a restorer of balances and filler-up of voids.... The search for balance is bad because it is imaginary. Revenge. Even if one, in fact, kills or tortures one’s enemy, it is, *in a sense*, imaginary.” The point here is not that balance is bad; indeed, balance is essential to Weil’s thought and her understanding of justice. The problem Weil is identifying is the distortion of balance into a territorial schematic of compensation. See also Bell, “Reading Simone Weil on Rights, Justice, and Love,” 227: “While rights always operates within a horizontal symmetry on a social scale, justice operates within a vertical asymmetry on a cosmic scale.”

thinking only of carving out for herself her share of black or yellow human flesh and of obtaining for herself the hegemony of Europe” (NR 195). She describes the modern nation as a mere “territorial aggregate,” an artificially constructed but also “definite, circumscribed thing” under a single authority seeking to control other territories (NR 99, 103). It is, she writes, “totalitarian and grossly materialistic,” seeking in all things the “exclusive worship” of itself (LP 78).<sup>33</sup> Eric Springsted summarizes Weil’s historical account of the modern state’s emergence: “the state itself gradually became the centre of all obligation, commanding all affection and duty...at the cost of failing to allow its citizens recognition of values other than those which brought it power.”<sup>34</sup>

Compare this to Weil’s rich gestures towards a country that might provide people with the roots they need to live more truthfully and generously.<sup>35</sup> She suggests that such a country would recognize and revitalize the overlapping and diffuse loyalties of local, organic life as an integral part of, rather than a threat to, its ability to deliver a meaningful sense of history, place, and the public good.<sup>36</sup> In this way, a country acts not as an end in

---

<sup>33</sup> Weil is here commenting specifically on the theology of the Roman Empire, which she believes is both precursor and inspiration to the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European nation building project.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Springsted, “Rootedness: Culture and Value,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> At times Weil distinguishes between the terms ‘country’ and ‘nation.’ See, e.g., GG 222: “A nation cannot be an object of charity. But a country can be such, as an environment bearing traditions which are eternal. Every country can be that.”

<sup>36</sup> See Weil’s comments on patriotism prior to the emergence of the modern nation state: “Patriotism was something diffuse, nomadic, which expanded or contracted according to degrees of similarity and common danger. It was mixed up with different kinds of loyalty – loyalty to other men, a lord, a king, or a city... [One’s obligation was to] the public or the public good,” which could refer to all manner of places, from one’s village to all of humanity and even, in the case of the lands south of the Loire, which was not a single state, to one’s language (NR 103; see also p. 106).

itself but as a “vital medium” for our “relationship to goodness” – a tangible body that provides the soul with roots in a world oriented towards universal justice (NR 157).<sup>37</sup>

Hence, in the course of arguing that we must recover culture and the past, Weil clarifies that she does not mean for people to be “fenced in,” but intends for this sort of recovery to increase the amount of “fresh air” available. In fact, she argues that “rooting in and the multiplying of contacts are complementary to one another” (NR 52). She provides as an example of this the fact that “French thought has been more enriched by the Albigenses and troubadours of the twelfth century, who were not Frenchmen, than by the entire output from [Provence] in the course of succeeding centuries” when it was a part of the French nation (NR 106). Likewise, many of her points in *Letter to a Priest* (1942) are that exchange and transference between different religious systems foster the emergence of truth and revelation and that when a religion sees its truths as its own rightful property it tends to lose those very truths. For example, while remarking that best parts of the Old Testament are post-exilic writings, she suggests that “Israel learnt the most essential truth about God (namely, that God is good before being powerful) from foreign traditional sources, Chaldean, Persian or Greek, and thanks to the exile” (LP 14; cf. 41ff and 71ff). Given all of this, Weil argues that “there is no need for [a country] to be protected from foreign influences...in any rigorous fashion” (NR 161). Indeed, as she outlines it, international organizations would have authority to deal with certain issues – “essential problems whose scope is an international one” – while at once various local

---

<sup>37</sup> See Springsted, “Rootedness,” 177: “The word ‘culture’ for Weil carries the sense of the verb ‘to culture’, for she envisions culture as a vital medium in which human beings grow and which nourishes them.”

centres from different countries would be able to independently set up relationships and networks with each other (NR 161). “Wouldn’t it be a natural thing,” Weil asks, “for Brittany, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland to feel themselves, in regard to certain things, to be parts of the same environment?” (NR 161).

The difference between these two visions of nationalism is that one posits that people, land, and culture are pieces on a two dimensional map that we can either have or not have, while the other reaches for another dimension in which cooperation is not mere compromise (between two claims on a single territory) but a bountiful coming-together.<sup>38</sup> We should read Weil’s political writings as her attempt to push us to practice a complex array of relationships (in politics and otherwise), in which we conceive of others as three-dimensional persons with their own lives and perspectives. As she puts it, “the imagination, filler up of the void, is essentially a liar. It does away with the third dimension, for it is only real objects that are in three dimensions. It does away with multiple relationships” (N 160).<sup>39</sup>

Though it is of course not a (formal) country, I think that the network of L’Arche communities provides an effective example of what Weil seems to be getting at in her political visions. Core members of a L’Arche community (adults with intellectual disabilities and assistants) live together in a small house incorporating mutual compassion into daily life. These communities are rooted in the local culture and are “well integrated into a village or a city neighbourhood” through a network of support (SS

---

<sup>38</sup> Vanier makes a similar point by contrasting mere cooperation with communion. See CG 24-25, 84-85, and 160.

<sup>39</sup> See also N 3: “Others constitute a limit and an existence outside ourselves, the only one, for matter... 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension. Respect.” Weil’s ellipses.

2). Though each community is different, with its own charter and structure (adapted to local circumstance), these networks often include support – e.g., finances and governance – from the broader community. The L’Arche house in its turn serves the community, offering services to other adults with disabilities and their caregivers as well as other community programs (assistance to the poor and various peace programs are popular). There is a certain fluidity but also undissolved difference between core members and those staff, volunteers, and participants who interact with a L’Arche community on a daily, weekly, or less frequent basis.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, a major part of what sustains L’Arche’s local presence is its remarkably widespread international communion: the sharing of a common story and mission that does not require a broader authority (Vanier himself acts more as a spiritual leader than as an administrator or political authority) to allow for productive exchange and transference of ideas, people, and identities.<sup>41</sup>

### **Conclusion: ‘After Death – Love’**

The question then becomes the nature of this more promising way of human relating and also how we might ascend to such a dimension. There is a productive tension here for both Vanier and Weil, with each seemingly insisting that these kinds of relationships are at once what is most natural to us and an impossibility or near impossibility for us.

---

<sup>40</sup> For some of the rationale of this structure, see CG 116: “Some communities begin to panic when they feel that their neighbours are becoming committed to them; they are frightened of losing their identity, of losing control. But isn’t this what true expansion means?”

<sup>41</sup> For a good introduction to the life, philosophy, and structure of L’Arche, see Philip Coulter, “How to do Ordinary Things” (two parts), *Ideas*, hosted by Paul Kennedy, CBC Radio One. Broadcast September 2 & September 9, 2014. Available online at <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-to-do-ordinary-things-part-1-1.2914058> & <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-to-do-ordinary-things-part-2-1.2760718>.

Vanier tells us that he founded L'Arche in order "to find a more human existence"; the entirety of his project (and the title of one of his books) is about learning how to become human (SS 1). Weil, meanwhile, quips that the network of relations we get in the politics she prefers would be "something very complicated, but also very human" (NR 103).<sup>42</sup> She suggests that these fluid, natural affinities are as innate to us in our day to day activities as the air we breathe, noting that while "pride in national glory is by its nature exclusive [and] non-transferable," this "national pride is far removed from the affairs of daily life" and that a daily lived compassion crosses all human boundaries and is able to inspire "a real, ardent sense of fraternity" (NR 172, 173). In another late political essay Weil states that "fluidity is the hallmark of a circle based on natural affinities," in which we simply we simply associate with different groups and people without a clear awareness of insiders and outsiders (APP 29-30).

However, at the same time, both Vanier and Weil claim on numerous occasions that we can only pass to the compassionate love that marks these kind of truthful relations by going through a certain kind of death. Vanier writes that "Community is the place where the power of the ego is revealed and where it is called to die so that people become one body and give much life" (CG 27; cf. 7, 17). Weil follows up her "axiomatic" statement (quoted earlier) that "there is no force on this earth except force" by stating: "As for the force which is not of this earth, contact with it cannot be bought at any lesser price than the passing through a kind of death" (NR 218). Both Weil and Vanier make these claims because they believe that love is only manifested in weakness and frailty,

---

<sup>42</sup> Here Weil is prescriptively describing political arrangement from the past.

not in strength; elevation, Weil tells us, coincides with frailty, not domination (see, e.g., N 250-251).

Both Weil and Vanier look, for the model of this love through death, to Jesus, who “becomes small and poor, who goes down the ladder of human promotion, who takes the last place, the place of a servant or a slave,” and who seems to allow others to triumph over him (SS 15-16). Consider, for example, Vanier’s poignant account of Jesus’s laying down of his garments prior to washing the disciples’ feet.

Clothing... signifies one’s position of function in life: soldiers, mayors, doctors, judges, athletes, and priests all wear clothes that reveal their function in society. Clothes often express a certain identity, dignity and authority – or lack of these – and likewise clothes can signify one’s place or status in society.... As Jesus removes his garments, he is stripping himself as well of any function or social status.... He presents himself to his disciples just as a person, a friend.... At the end of our lives we will be judged by how we have loved, and not by our clothes, or the masks society has imposed on us. We will be judged according to who we really are and not on our job or role in society.... Later that same night and the next morning, others will strip [Jesus] of his clothes. Jesus will be tortured, condemned to death and nailed to a cross naked, like a criminal. Others will make him poor and vulnerable. He will suffer and be reduced to tears. But here... it is Jesus himself who removed his own garments. (SS 18-20)

Vanier’s point is that when we are “self-satisfied,” successful, and “well-situated,” our “hearts are not humble enough simply to welcome the presence of God” and others; for this, we must be in touch with our inner weaknesses and poverty (SS 6). This means that we must “lose the security of being the ‘boss’ who has firm beliefs, knows everything, plans well and is in control” (SS 45). This entails passing through a certain “poverty of

spirit,” a dark night of the soul that we must endure in order to pass into the full weakness of love (SS 45).<sup>43</sup>

I will later consider both Weil’s and Vanier’s separate constructive accounts of love’s weakness, but it is worth first examining their shared negative account of how charity from a posture of (conventional) power and strength remains within the logic of territorial force. Weil elaborates on a certain kind of pity that derives from a sentimental attachment to a sympathetic cause, which enables me to position myself as (the one to offer) the solution (see, e.g., N 42, 122, and 141). An example of this is when we see the afflicted “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” (WG 93).<sup>44</sup> Her point is that a certain kind of charity serves only to reinforce existing power relations; generosity for the sake of something else – whether it be reward from God, one’s sense of superiority, or a feeling of goodness – treats the individual as an instrumental object for our own enhancement. She thus claims that someone who takes care of orphans is the same as a child murderer if the former is “forgetful of the fact that each of these children exists” (N 109). Weil is therefore suspicious of accounts of eschatological redemption

---

<sup>43</sup> Both Vanier and Weil appreciate and often use John of the Cross’s language of the dark night of the soul. For one of Weil’s uses see N 135: “Need of a reward, for the sake of balance; need to receive the equivalent of what one has given (cf. higher up); but if, doing violence to this need, powerful as gravity, we leave a void, there takes place as it were an inrush of air, and a supernatural reward supervenes.... (And yet, probably, we ought not to have desired it). The same applies to the ‘forgiveness of trespasses’.... There again, we accept a void in ourselves. The acceptance of a void in oneself is a supernatural thing. Where find the energy for an act without any counterpart? The energy has to come from elsewhere. And yet there must first of all be a tearing asunder, something of a desperate nature, so that a void may first of all be produced – Void: dark night.... One has to be for a certain time without any reward at all, natural or supernatural – Dark night.”

<sup>44</sup> See, NR 156, for a similar critique of “the practice of good works carried out in a certain spirit, ‘for the love of God’, as they say, the unfortunate object of compassion being but the raw material for the action, an anonymous means whereby one’s love of God can be manifested.” This, she argues, drawing on 1 John 4, is not love of the person and thus is not love of God.



(Christian or otherwise): they promise triumph in the terms of force, offering external compensations for virtuous acts (e.g., NR 152 and 227). She further argues that this is “why Christ [who breaks the cycle of compensation] did not come down from the Cross, and did not even remember, at the moment of supreme anguish, that he would return to life” (N 25).

Making a similar point, Vanier wryly notes that, in comparison with living with others in community, “it is so much easier to live alone and just *do* things for others,” for then we can be in control from a position of superiority (CG 26; cf. 186). Like Weil, he finds that we want “to exercise authority and help the poor from ‘on top,’ as someone superior, out of pity or even a certain disdain” (SS 32). Vanier finds the reaction of Judas (as well as that of Peter) to Jesus’s critique of this type of philanthropy illuminating. He notes that the gospel writers single out Judas’s negative reaction to three events: the last supper, the washing of the feet, and when Mary of Bethany washes Jesus’s feet with ointment (which Vanier suggests is where Jesus himself was inspired to wash the disciples’ feet). In the last instance, Judas’s complaint is the lack of charity: the expensive perfume should have been sold and given to the poor. Vanier elaborates: “In each of these situations Jesus appears weak and vulnerable, in search of communion. He no longer looks like the strong, powerful Messiah who is going to liberate the Jewish people. . . . Judas wants action. He wants struggle and power. He wants to be with a powerful Jesus and to have his share of that power,” even, we might add, when that power looks like selling perfume and giving the proceeds to the poor – objects to be used for the enhancement of oneself (SS 76-77).

Jesus recognizes, in short, that a system of justice with him on top remains one with all the same old terms of injustice. Weil's words on this point are incisive. "As each of us considers himself sufficiently capable of practising justice, each of us naturally think that a system under which he wielded power would be a reasonably just one. This is the temptation Christ underwent at the hands of the devil. Men are continually succumbing to it" (NR 153).<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, we begin to see Vanier's and Weil's understandings diverge here, with the death Vanier calls for acting, in some ways, as a prelude to a new life, whereas for Weil the entirety of our self and personality must be annulled so that the pure channel of God's love might act through us (see, e.g., N 19). This brings us to the themes I want to contrast in Weil and Vanier's accounts of compassion: limits, particularity, and receptivity.

---

<sup>45</sup> See also GG 154: "Bad union of opposites (bad because fallacious) is that which is achieved on the same [two dimensional] plane as the opposites. Thus the granting of domination to the oppressed. In this way we do not get free from the oppression-domination cycle." See also N 284: "To represent God to oneself as all-powerful is to represent oneself to oneself in a state of false divinity. Man is only able to be one with God by uniting himself to God stripped of his divinity."

## Chapter Two

### Weil on Impersonal Relationships: Neighbour Love and Friendship

In this chapter I look at Weil's constructive proposals for our relationships with others, with a particular view to truth – being truthful in relationships and encountering the other as a mode of truth-finding – and weakness. First I look generally at her presentation of what I call impersonal relations – at how we ought meet others and co-exist with them without our perspective (our person(ality)) being present. Then, as examples and for further nuance, I take a close look at her in-depth but also often tenuous, accounts of neighbour love or compassion and friendship.

#### **Part I – Impersonal Relationships**

In a letter to Father Perrin, while explaining why she does not think she ought to be a part of the church as a social structure, Weil describes an alternative way of associating with others to which she *does* feel called.

I have the essential need, and I think I can say the vocation, to move among men [sic] of every class and complexion, mixing with them and sharing their life and outlook, so far that is to say as conscience allows, merging into the crowd and disappearing among them, so that they show themselves as they are, putting off all disguises with me. It is because I long to know them so as to love them just as they are. For if I do not love them as they are, it will not be they whom I love, and my love will be unreal. I do not speak of helping them, because as far as that goes I am unfortunately quite incapable of doing anything as yet.... [I do speak of] the vocation to remain in a sense anonymous, ever ready to be mixed into the paste of common humanity. (WG 6-7)

She elaborates in a follow-up letter:

I do not want to be adopted into a circle, to live among people who say 'we' and to be part of an 'us,' to find I am 'at home' in any human *milieu* whatever it may be.... I feel that it is necessary and ordained that I should be alone, a stranger and an exile in relation to every human circle without exception. This may seem to contradict what I wrote to you about my need to be merged into any human circle

in which I moved. [However,] to be lost to view in it is not to form part of it, and my capacity to mix with all of them implies that I belong to none. (WG 13; cf. APP 29-30)

Here we find the central concerns that animate much of Weil's thinking about relationships and sociality, about what it means to truthfully "move among" others and about what it means to love others as they are.<sup>46</sup> I suggest that we (drawing from Weil's frequent descriptions of the need for an impersonal relationship to an impersonal God)<sup>47</sup> think of the "almost inexpressible" relations with others that she envisions as impersonal relationships (WG 13).<sup>48</sup> Weil's stance (or non-stance) is impersonal in that she does not want in any way to belong to another or to a group, to give her person over to them; she also does not want to impose her person upon others, even to the point of remaining unknown to them. At the same time, she wants a high degree of contact with an unrestricted diversity of peoples; she wants these people to feel free around her and she wants to be able to see them truthfully, to see them "as they are." In this way, though she is pessimistic about the possibility of helping others, she hopes that she might love them (rather than a self-serving image of them) and that the reach of her love will not be

---

<sup>46</sup> Of course, it is important to take note of the fact that Weil speaks of this kind of life as her particular vocation. However, at least two things suggest that the general form of relationships that she prescribes for herself here has a much broader and arguably universal reach. First, the reason she gives for having this unusual vocation is that she thinks of herself as particularly vulnerable to seduction by social groups; thus it seems as though others should adopt a similar style of relating to others even as it may be permissible for them (being less prone to social seduction) to have a formal membership in a social group. Second, she articulates this personal vocation in the context of a general critique of the church as a social structure, and (elsewhere) a specific critique of Father Perrin's "imperfection" as a result of his (manner of?) belonging to the church (WG 48-49). This again suggests that she is giving voice to a relational style that is broadly applicable, even as she sees her own vocation as a particular and unusual variant of this style – namely, "to be a Christian outside the Church" (LP 11).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., NR 259-269 and N 241-242.

<sup>48</sup> Weil also, in at least one case, uses the terminology of impersonality to describe right relationships between people, writing that "pure friendship" is "a bond between two people [that] is in a sense impersonal" (WG 135).

artificially cut off by either her own needs and presence or by her personal belonging to one group and not another. In short, she wants a kind of ‘anonymous mixing,’ in which one’s person will not be present to inhibit either love’s intensity or its scope; in impersonality, Weil suggests, love might flow uninhibited. In this section I will explore this claim, examining Weil’s reasons behind putting forward the model of impersonal love, how she suggests we might achieve such impersonality, and the general shape of impersonal relationships that she sketches for us.

For Weil, one of the most important components of truthful relationships is that they should be free of attachments, which she describes as turning reality into “the reality of the self which we transfer into things” (GG 59). Attachments corrupt our relationships because when we invest our person into a person, group, cause, etc. our love becomes biased and partial; we come to “believe that some [beings] exist to a greater or lesser extent than others” (N 60). This is to say, we see – affectively if not intellectually – those to whom we are less or not at all attached as less worthy of love and compassion than those to whom we are attached. We thus arrange a false (because biased by our investments) hierarchy of reality according to the degree of our attachment. Weil writes: “Attachment is no more nor less than an insufficiency in our sense of reality. We are attached to the possession of a thing because we think that if we cease to possess it, it will cease to exist. A great many people do not feel with their whole soul that there is all the difference in the world between the destruction of a town and their own irremediable exile from that town” (GG 59). In other words, when we care more for some than others it corrupts our appraisal of a situation – perhaps by arousing more sympathy than is

warranted or by causing us to see more goodness or beauty than there actually is in the object to which we are attached and, correspondingly, less beauty in those objects to which we are less attached. Weil provides an example in her chiding of her friend and mentor Father Perrin for being more sympathetic towards and impressed by Christians who “are in affliction” than by non-Christians who perform similar heroics; this despite his recognition of “implicit faith” and his “breadth of mind” (WG 48). Such bias, Weil suggests to him, “comes from attaching yourself to the Church as to an earthly country” (WG 49). She goes on to observe that when one has a strong sense of particular belonging, “a little attachment is almost inevitable” (WG 49). It seems, then, that any sort of belonging in a relationship that contains particular wants or needs contains a personal investment which carries a nearly automatic bias along with it.

We begin to see here that particular attachments between people degrade the quality of the love and affection within these relationships as well, a point on which Weil elaborates in detail. The problem Weil identifies is that attachments tend irresistibly towards bonds of dependence and need; for the enjoyment that we get from another, when loved as a particular person, becomes something that we require (see GG 170-171 and WG 131-132). Here we can consider Weil’s warning that “it is dangerous to give to a human being, a cause, etc. more than one is able to *naturally and without effort*. If this limit is overstepped, one runs the risk of coming to hate them. Also of becoming dependent on them, for one expects an equivalent return for what one has given in excess” (N 122, my emphasis).<sup>49</sup> The situation Weil is describing is one in which the

---

<sup>49</sup> On the importance of loving within our natural limit see also N 77 and WG 132.

benefactor has become personally involved in her gifts (of love, attention, care, etc.), no longer giving freely and easily; invested in her gifts, she becomes attached to the other. The broader argument from Weil, here and elsewhere, is that to enjoy another person – to desire her, have affection for her, and receive pleasure from her company – intimately involves one’s intellect, emotions, and indeed one’s very sense of being, such that we desperately need her.<sup>50</sup> This happens in its most extreme forms, Weil thinks, in the love of a mother for her child and in carnal love, which, she says, combines sympathy with habit (WG 132-133). I take this to mean that frequent and regular contact with another combined with circumstances that make it easy to identify with him or her (presumably provided through the desperate vulnerability of the mother’s child and the shared goals of a couple as they build a life together) make it almost impossible for love to remain free from dependency. In any case, the various gifts we give to the other in these relationships of attachment are not objects that we can hold at a distance, but contain pieces of ourselves.<sup>51</sup> And to have one’s self (repeatedly) invested into another in this way is to need them. A bond of affection thus ends up incorporating an element of necessity in it: an investment requiring a return.

---

<sup>50</sup> See N 192: “Love, pain produced by this separate existence. Two beings desire to be one.” And p. 201: “One cannot live in a world in which desire does not attain its object.” We also see echoes of this attachment in Weil’s claim that sin is an intoxication, with our entire being taken up by receiving gratification from some particular good. See N 2-3, 60, 88, 100, 163-164

<sup>51</sup> Thus Weil pushes us to act without attachment to our actions. See N 94: “Distinguish between: abstaining from acts inspired by desire – acting without desire – non-attachment either to the acts or to their fruits –

Three sorts of renunciation | renunciation of obligatory action (Tamas) | relinquishment of an action from fear of bodily suffering (Rajas) | non-attached form of action (Sattva)....  
Action performed *with much effort*, through desire or from an egoistical move, Rajas | undertaken blindly, without considering the means or the consequences, Tamas.... Deliberation – momentary silent contemplation of the various courses to adopt from every possible angle simultaneously. Prior to that, non-operation of the mind.”

In continuity with this, Weil argues that dependence introduces competition for possession and power into a relationship. As she explains, “when a human being is in any degree necessary to us, we cannot desire his good unless we cease to desire our own”; we must possess the other or be dominated by her, for “we are in the power of that of which we stand in need, unless we possess it” (WG 132).<sup>52</sup> In other words, when we need the other we cannot desire her own good or her own autonomous perspective apart from our own needs, and therefore tyranny and inequality come to dominate the relationship (see WG 134). This way of conducting our relationships, where the way each person acts towards the other is dictated by their own needs and desires is what Weil is getting at when she writes: “*Gravity*. Generally speaking, what we expect of others depends on the effect of gravity upon ourselves; what we receive from them depends on the effect of gravity upon them. Sometimes (by chance) the two coincide, often they do not” (N 138).

When dependency deforms our love into a reactionary need, Weil elaborates, it transforms the other person into that from which we must consume what we need, a lifeless means for our own ends.<sup>53</sup> Needing the other, we must collapse her to ourselves, erasing her reality – her autonomous desires and needs – in favour of a projected image of our own making (see WG 134-135). Rowan Williams summarizes the point effectively: “If I love someone as a particular individual, this means that their

---

<sup>52</sup> See also FLN 87: “In nature, either I am at the centre (perspective) or another person is, who dominates me by brute force, and the rest is simply pieces of the universe.”

<sup>53</sup> For Weil’s description of the way we approach the other as food, see FLN 284: “Instead of loving a human being for his hunger, we love him as food for ourselves. We love like cannibals.” For a critique of the way we turn the other person into an intermediary, see N 24: “A man standing ten paces away from me is something separated from me by a distance (ten paces), but also another point of view under which all things appear. The relationship between me and another man can never be analogous to the relationship between the blind man and his stick [Weil’s favourite image of mediation]...; that is why slavery is contrary both to nature and reason.” On this point, see also J. P. Little, “Simone Weil’s Concept of Decreation,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture*, 40-42.



particularity is attractive to me. *These* features of their reality meet or gratify my expectations...; [therefore,] my selection of them as objects of love means that I have found reason to ignore or discount other aspects of their reality.”<sup>54</sup> Loving another in her particularity thus means loving her in “*my* world on *my* terms,” such that this ‘other’ can only come from ourselves; we thus lose her otherness.<sup>55</sup> Seeking to possess the other (because of our dependence), we instead become stuck in a prism of our own needs and imaginary fulfilments; and, to cover up the ugliness of our dependence, we “manufacture sham advantages [in our relationships] where there is only necessity” (WG 133).<sup>56</sup> In this way, relying on a particular loved one to fulfill our needs and complete us actually takes us farther away from the beloved. Weil describes our frustrated need effectively: “To be one, to make the beloved enter into oneself, to make the beloved become oneself. Well, Narcissus had that, and was still more unhappy – still farther away from what he loved” (N 12-13; cf. 192). The enjoyment we get from having our needs met by a particular beloved leads us to believe that more firmly binding our person up with hers will result in a greater enjoyment and fulfillment, but when we have bound the beloved to ourselves we end up in the futile love of ourselves.

---

<sup>54</sup> Rowan Williams, “Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-existence of God,” in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2007), 214-215.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>56</sup> This account of the way that we manufacture an illusory advantage for and elevation of the self from our acts of violence helps to explain Weil’s frequent remarks on the fictional nature of evil deeds (even as she fully acknowledges that the effects of such actions are all too real). For perhaps the most profound instance of her remarks of this nature, see N 227: “Suffering without consolation, for consolations are manufactured by the imagination, of which we have to have emptied ourselves so as to make room for God. The imagination is the false divinity.... Certain acts (e.g. killing, save perhaps in exceptional cases) are in their essence imaginary, even though they be carried out effectively. It is these which are forbidden.... God is and does not appear. The devil appears and is not. ‘It is I who bestow all these kingdoms.’”

Weil often describes the error of this imaginary projection as conceiving of the relationship and the other in the terms of a false perception of the infinite or illimitable (e.g., N 3, 25-26, 48, 77, and 180-181). She grounds this in her claim that desire knows no limits, that “there is in every man and in every group of men a feeling that they have a just and legitimate claim to be masters of the universe” (N 33-34). Driven by the tides of our need, we find that these needs are insatiable, for we are futilely trying to overcome the limits of our own materiality by attaching more material to ourselves. The structure of our need self-perpetuates, as Weil’s rhetorical questions powerfully illustrate: “To conquer only the terrestrial globe? To live only a hundred years? To make only 40% profit on the money one has invested?” (N 88).

What is relevant to my purposes here is Weil’s claim that in regards to “human relations[,] all those which have something infinite about them are unjust” (N 34). Her point is that in making the other a projection of our needs, we perceive that person, who is in fact finite and measurable, as infinite. As Weil puts it, “One loves the being on whom one depends absolutely and from whom one expects good or some alleviation from evil (even if he be the author of the evil, and unjustly so)” (N 138). There is a mutually reinforcing cycle by which our dependence on the other makes her everything to us, which makes us further dependent on her.

Weil describes two different forms that this projection of infinity onto the other can take. On the one hand, we might perceive another as one that we utterly dominate, a slave to our demands, with everything she has or is being negligible to us; our need for her consists in there being someone who so depends on us that she appears to be

disposable.<sup>57</sup> Or, on the other hand, we may imagine the other as the absolute being which can meet all our demands. Weil describes this as “count[ing] oneself for nothing, while counting the great object to which one devotes oneself as everything. State (Richelieu), God – or a beloved being – etc., etc. That can mean: to count oneself for everything. Apparent elevation, which in fact consists in an absolute licence accorded to the lower motives” (N 125).<sup>58</sup> In other words, our two choices are to idolatrously give ourselves over in entirety to the other or to deprive the other of her own autonomy by dominating and possessing her.<sup>59</sup>

Weil emphasizes the way that we lose our own autonomy following this sort of infinite conception of the other. Indeed, how could we even desire autonomy when the other is everything to us? Weil observes that this is why we are grateful for small favours that keep us indebted and dependent while “a favour which is sufficiently great to lift one above any such dependence...runs the risk of provoking a grudge”; and it explains the “devotion of the slave who, having nothing, places his all in his master” (N 138). It is also why, in the case of the ‘dominant’ person, ingratitude on the part of the weaker party

---

<sup>57</sup> I extrapolate this point, in part, and especially its terms, from N 34: “If all the food two men have per day is in the one case 1 lb. of bread and in the other case 18 oz, the difference is finite; if one of them has ¼ lb. and the other one 6 lb., the difference is infinite, for what is everything for one is negligible for the other.... The notion of the negligible forms the passage between the finite and the infinite.” Weil articulates our need to have that which has value submit to us in WG 105 and 109: “A beautiful thing involves no good except itself.... We should like to feed upon it but it is merely something to look at.... It may be that vice, depravity, and crime are nearly always, or even perhaps always, in their essence, attempts to eat beauty, to eat what we should only look at.... Men want to turn this same love [of the beautiful] toward a being who is like themselves and capable of answering to their love, of saying yes, of surrendering.” See here also Weil’s account of Roman domination in SE 89-144, esp. pp112-114. And see her description of the desire for total domination in Iliad 16-17.

<sup>58</sup> See also N 163-164: “Desire contains an element of the absolute, and if it fails in its object...this absolute element is transferred over to the obstacle. State of mind of the conquered, the oppressed.”

<sup>59</sup> Weil gives a similar account of these two opposite forms of false infinity when she argues that “fear, like desire...contains the illimitable.... Or rather, it contains the Absolute, the false absolute.... Desire contains an illusion of all-powerfulness; fear, of a fundamental powerlessness” (N 100).

“produces a void in the benefactor”; for the benefactor cannot live without a servility to the infinite degree on the part of the receiver (N 138).<sup>60</sup> Thus, ironically, the drive to possess the other on whom we are dependent leads to our being further possessed by the other. Such relationships reach their ugliest stage when a particular bond loses all affection and is “made up of need and nothing else”; but Weil’s suggestion is that this is the case (or near to the case) in more relationships than we might think, for the effect of necessity is to erase affection by the “mere passage of time” (WG 133). Weil observes that as this process continues, we come to hate what we depend on and be disgusted by what depends on us: the other becomes the infinite sign of our own slavery (WG 136).

We see Weil’s critique of attachment and dependence operative on a broader social scale in her rejection of any distinction between charity and justice. Her concern is not merely that charity severed from justice will result in an arbitrary and unfair distribution of goods. It is, moreso, that charity and justice, when they are conceived of as separate from each other, lead to domination and servility (WG 85). With our society’s charity-free justice, those who have in surplus are freed from the obligation of giving, allowing them to dominate those who lack sufficient goods. At the same time, with our

---

<sup>60</sup> I can think of no more vivid and developed example of this than the character of M. de Charlus and his benefaction and desperate need for the young violinist Morel in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols., trans. Scott Moncrieff et. al. (New York: The Modern Library, 2003). See vol. 4, pp. 351-55, 414-428, 458-86, and 625-656; vol. 5, pp. 210-212, 322-331, 371-372, and 395-436; and vol. 6, pp. 107-113, 130-132. This dynamic mirrors the narrator’s own reliance on his ‘captive’ lover Albertine, whom he jealously seeks to possess through gifts and manipulation. Near the end of this abdication, he finds, as he arrives home one night, that “as I raised my eyes for one last look from the outside at the window of the room [which holds Albertine, and] in which I should presently find myself, I seemed to behold the luminous gates which were about to close behind me and of which I myself had forged, for an eternal slavery, the inflexible bars of gold” (vol. 5, 445; cf. pp. 468 & 516-517). I imagine that Weil’s own admiration for Proust and his presentations of art and beauty (see, e.g., N 174, 313, 335, 423, 444; WG 109) comes in part from the fact that the narrator’s impressions of pure beauty pass through the gauntlet of the ugliest and most neurotic experiences of human attachment.

society's justice-free charity, when the wealthy are generous they are, in the eyes of many, entitled to obsequious gratitude, and at the very least have the "right to be pleased" with themselves; what is in reality merely just distribution becomes magnanimous virtue (WG 85). Weil points out that it is therefore easy to understand why we have invented the distinction between charity and justice: in addition to further bolstering the position of the powerful and wealthy, it allows what should be a universal concern to degenerate into particular attachments, which facilitates the temptation to place our security in the idol of another person through either servility or magnanimity.

Weil therefore insists on a "completely universal love" in direct and uncompromising terms: "The children of God should not have any country here below but the universe itself, with the totality of all the reasoning creatures it ever has contained, contains, or ever will contain.... Our love should stretch as widely across all space, and should be equally distributed in every portion of it, as is the very light of the sun" (WG 49-50). The analogy to the sun's light here is no accident, for Weil's primary source of inspiration for the injunction "to love all things equally" is Jesus's call in the gospels to imitate the perfection of God who equally distributes sun and rain on both the just and the unjust: "Christ has bidden us to attain to the perfection of our heavenly Father by imitating his indiscriminate bestowal of light" (N 267 and WG 50).<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, it is "God's creative love" which enables us to attain to an impartial

---

<sup>61</sup> See also NR 260: "Thus it is that blind impartiality characteristic of inert matter, it is that relentless regularity characterizing the order of the world, completely indifferent to men's individual quality, and because of this so frequently accused of injustice – it is that which is held up [by Christ] as a model of perfection to the human soul." For Weil, impartiality is among the most important characteristics of the true God. In fact, God's partiality (his favouritism for a particular race) is, for Weil, a more fundamental problem with the theology of the Old Testament than is God's violence (which stems from his partiality). See LP 16, 64, and 69.

universality; it is this love – and not any love that comes from our own effort – that fills us, allowing our gaze to be “merged in the gaze of God” (WG 50). And just as our love must be universal, so should our thinking be completely impartial; no particular thing, nothing “less vast...than the universe” itself, justly imposes any favours upon our intelligence and our appraisal of truth (WG 49). Any sort of particular desire, wanting one state of affairs and not another or one person and not another, blocks us from truthfully perceiving and loving the entire universe, for we must even “love evil” (N 493).<sup>62</sup>

Hence, Weil emphasizes detachment from all particulars so that, wholly loving God alone, we can become a channel of God’s love and thereby “be the same for all” (N 289). Instead of attempting to love by consuming finite goods, we must learn to “hunger without desiring to eat” (N 128; cf. SNLG 159). We must learn to see the fundamental insatiability of our desire and dwell within this “non-satiety” rather than seeking our satisfaction in particular others (N 60). This detachment allows us to clearly see the futility of all finite values and aspirations and to see that the world and other beings exist independently from us (GG 100). This, then, allows for a love free of preference, for we are then able to prevent our love and desire “from focussing itself in a particular direction, from subordinating itself to a particular object” (N 493).<sup>63</sup> Instead, we come to

---

<sup>62</sup> See N 489: “We are constituted by a movement toward Good. But we are wrong to seek for it in any particular object.” See also Williams, “The Necessary Non-existence of God,” 205-206.

<sup>63</sup> See also SNLG 158: “It is not for man to seek, or even to believe in, God. He has only to refuse his love to everything which is not God... It is enough to recognize, what is obvious to any mind, that all the goods of this world past, present or future, real or imaginary, are finite and limited and radically incapable of satisfying the desire which burns perpetually within us for an infinite and perfect good.” This statement, and others like it, must be read together with Weil’s argument that when we do have a pure love of God, we join with the love of God and so also, in God, love perfectly the limited beings of this universe.

love the finite beings of the universe “not...as beings worthy of love, but as unworthy of it,” feeling with our entire being at all times the mortality and inadequacy of those particular beings whom we love (N 492).<sup>64</sup> When seen (and loved) in this way, such beings cannot then bind our love, and it can flow out impartially over all that exists.

Weil often describes this indiscriminate detachment as “lov[ing] beings...from the abode of God” outside of the world (WG 50). In other words, our impartiality does not come from being a particular being detached from other particular beings; instead, Weil calls us to shed our particular person and become “*bound*...to creation in its totality” (WG 50, my emphasis; cf. N 19). Part of the reason this distinction is important for Weil is because it means that detached impartiality is not a matter of callousness; it is not the indifference of a particular being asserting him- or herself over others by demonstrating his or her coolness or lack of concern. Weil writes that we should “possess the whole universe and each thing...while remaining unsated by them” (N 60). Here Weil is pushing us to radically intensify our love (or rather, to radically open ourselves to the infinite love of God), such that our own desire and person in no way informs our encounter with the world and other people. Particularized wants and needs (stemming from particular attachments) are such a problem because they by definition want one thing and not the other; guided by the quest for fulfillment, they cannot want everything, that is, want uninhibited contact with the fullness of reality. As Weil puts it, “we do not become detached, we change our attachment. We must attach ourselves to the All....

---

<sup>64</sup> See N 218: “To love whilst remaining detached. To endure the thought that those we love, on whom we think lovingly, are mortal, are perhaps dead at the very moment we are thinking of them – this is an anguish. We must not seek consolation for this anguish, but endure it. The greater our love the greater our ability to endure this thought.”

Through and beyond each sensation, we must feel the universe. What does it matter then whether it be pleasure or pain?... This contact is joy” (N 21-22).

In consonance with this, Weil claims that a properly detached impartiality does not diminish reality but intensifies it. She instructs us to “‘Take thou delight through detachment.’ More generally, never to think of a thing which we cannot actually see without thinking that perhaps it has been destroyed. Let such a thought not dissipate the sense of reality, but render it more intense” (N 218-219). It is, rather, our imaginary consolations and impositions “of the self which we transfer into things” via attachment that dilutes and corrupts reality (GG 59). Here we get a sense of what Weil means when she writes of a tender impartiality – namely, an impartiality that deeply loves and appreciates the fragility of the world’s beauty. The praise Weil offers to the author of *The Iliad* sketches an effective portrait of this impartiality.

Such a heaping-up of violent deeds would have a frigid effect, were it not for the note of incurable bitterness that continually makes itself heard, though often only a single word marks its presence, often a mere stroke of the verse, or a run-on line. It is in this that the *Iliad* is absolutely unique, in this bitterness that proceeds from tenderness and that spreads over the whole human race, impartial as sunlight.... Justice and love, which have hardly any place in this study of extremes and of unjust acts of violence, nevertheless bathe the work in their light, without ever becoming noticeable themselves, except as a kind of accent. Nothing precious is scorned, whether or not death is its destiny; everyone’s unhappiness is laid bare without dissimulation or disdain; no man is set above or below the condition common to all men; whatever is destroyed is regretted. Victors and vanquished are brought equally near us.... If there is any difference, it is that the enemy’s misfortunes are possibly more sharply felt. (*Iliad* 30)



More generally, one gets a deep sense of reverence (and not shallow indifference) in Weil's writings about other people, the natural world, art, and culture.<sup>65</sup> This reverence is a love for the world, which seeks to allow and enable its truthful manifestation by fully receiving its independent reality while staying out of its way. As Weil writes, "I do not in the least wish that this created world should fade from my view, but that it should no longer be to me personally that it shows itself" (GG 89). The perfection of Weil's impartial detachment is at once a kind of being present to the infinite degree, such that one's person disappears, overwhelmed by the reality to which one is present.

The impartiality Weil is describing is nothing short of a transportation of the self "into the whole universe" by making "the *I* ... as big as the world" (N 19; cf. 8, 46-47). This means, Weil states, that we must "be alone in the universe in order to be identical with the universe" (N 25).<sup>66</sup> While she does not explain this claim, it is a fairly straightforward conclusion from her critique of attachment: to be in company would mean that there are particular things that we are not, making us less than identical with the universe, and things and people to which we may be (or become) more or less attached, making our love less than impartial. A fully impersonal love of others means that we have to fully be in contact with (to wholly feel) their independent reality without allowing any other sort of connection (which would involve our personal wants and needs) to get mixed up in this absolute contact; this is to "merge into the crowd and disappear among them, ... a stranger and an exile in relation to every human circle."<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., N 12-13; Simone Weil, "Are We Struggling for Justice?," trans. Marina Barabas, *Philosophical Investigations*, 53 (January 1987); SE 10-12, 20-23, 35-44; and WG 99-130.

<sup>66</sup> See also GG 57: "Absolute solitude. Then we possess the truth of the world."

<sup>67</sup> See page 36 above.

We have already seen that a common, but false and degrading, way to try to accomplish this identification with the universe is via the infinite expansion of one's own perspective through the elimination of all other perspectives.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, Weil argues, the path to a true ascent to being one with the universe lies in the opposite direction, via an ever increasing embrace of ever more situated perspectives into a complete vision that is no longer perspective. She writes: "It is always a question of rising above perspectives through the composition of perspectives, of placing oneself in the *third dimension*" (N 239).<sup>69</sup> Weil gives the example of how different a storm looks to a passenger on a ship and an experienced ship captain.<sup>70</sup> While "the passenger reads chaos, unlimited danger, fear, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, the means of escape from the storm, a duty to act courageously" (ER 302). The ship captain sees the power of the storm and the danger this power holds just as the passenger does, but he is able to place these perspectives within his more comprehensive experience of the sea, his ship, and his seamanship. In some ways, the point is simply that to conceive a situation adequately we must see it "from an infinite number of points of view at once" (N 111; cf. 64-65). This is the difference, Weil often illustrates, between hearing a melody and series of notes (e.g., N 60). A comprehensive perspective undoes the distortion of partiality that we get in a personal perspective, making us one with (the melody of) the universe.

At the same time, however, Weil's emphasis on a *composition* of perspectives already indicates that what she is talking about is much more than a surveyor adding

---

<sup>68</sup> See Chapter One above.

<sup>69</sup> Weil continues by claiming that this dimension is "The breadth and depth of the love of Christ."

<sup>70</sup> See ER 301-302. I was alerted to the usefulness of this example by Diogenes Allen in his essay "The Concept of Reading and the Book of Nature" in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*, 99-101.

together square feet on a map (which would also be a rather odd way to conceive of apprenticeship in any craft, including sailing) until she has a complete picture (see N 151). It is, instead, a matter of somehow holding together an array of stridently different and often discordant points of view. For, Weil shows, in our perceptions “we are not given sensations and [then] meanings,” which we interpret from our sensations as a separate act; rather, we directly receive “the meanings we ourselves read in appearances” (ER 298). The image of reading is important here, as a metaphor and an example, for when we read we do not perceive marks on a paper which we then piece together into letters and words and then further interpret these words as referring to separable meanings; we just read the meaning on the page. What this means in terms of perspective is that an independent perspective is what gives us personhood, and as such perspective is irrevocably bound up with valuation according to all sorts of motives, goals, duties, debts and needs. Two people in the same place who hear the same explosion from the same place in fact hear something very different if one of them has lived in a war-zone. Perspective thus has everything to do with the way we act and who we are, with what drives and motives us: “If I read the possibility of winning honour in a noise, I run towards the noise; if I read danger and nothing else [in the same noise], I run far from the noise” (ER 300). One consequence is that such embodied and lived perspectives will often clash with one another: “one person’s need threatens another and drives them away,” as Rowan Williams puts it.<sup>71</sup> This is why, for Weil, composition requires and leads to an ascent to another dimension, one in which contradiction dissolves and

---

<sup>71</sup> Williams, “The Necessary Non-existence of God,” 204. See also N 493: “All desires are contradictory.”

becomes a unity.<sup>72</sup> It is also why Weil's various statements about the need to bring together various perspectives so often follow or precede her reflections on the complexity of the moral life (because we must hold together the often competing needs of different people) (e.g., N 8, 41-42, 75-80, 135, 142, and 151-152). Weil does not call us to arrange all aspects of the world on a single plane, flattening out the world like the sailor with his map, but frequently writes of the need for a "composition...[of] multiple perspectives...on multiple planes" (N 42; cf. 239).

We start to see here that the modern temptation to reduce Weil's articulations of a comprehensive perspective to cognition will not work, either in terms of an abstract omniscience (complete knowledge *of* the world) or a perfect objectivity (stripping all objects down to their 'basic' data-bits).<sup>73</sup> To better understand what Weil is getting at we might look to Diogenes Allen's astute interpretation of a tricky passage from Weil's "Essay on the Notion of Reading" (1940-1942), which reads: "What we call the world, that is the meanings we read; this is therefore not real. However, this [meaning] grips us as if from without; this is therefore real" (ER 298).<sup>74</sup> Weil's point, Allen argues, is not that we are wrong to perceive the world as laden with meaning. Nor is it that we take our perceptions (of a meaningful world) for reality when we should take them for sense impressions that tell us only about how we perceive and nothing about external reality. Instead, throughout the essay, she shows "that we are *gripped* by meaning, and what

---

<sup>72</sup> One important way of thinking about the way we manufacture illusory fulfilments is that we provide a false unity to the world (by making a parochial perspective universal). Enduring the void, which Weil so often writes about, is the practice of refusing to make (false) unity while still ardently desiring it. This unfulfilled desire is the practice of waiting for God. See N 151 and Williams, "The Necessary Non-existence of God," 204-207.

<sup>73</sup> Weil's critique of modern science is that it reduces all beings to a singular plane.

<sup>74</sup> I here use Allen's translation. See Allen, "The Concept of Reading," 98.

grips us is real.... Reading is compared to the sensations caused by an unexpected blow to the stomach, and indicates that reading too is a contact with what is outside ourselves. Our world is the meaning we read; that we are gripped indicates that we are in contact with reality.”<sup>75</sup> The captain’s advantage is that he derives *more* meaning from the sea than the passenger does. “Given a perspective,” Allen continues, “what we read is indeed what ought to be read from that perspective.”<sup>76</sup> But at the same time, any perspective, coming from one place and not another, is limited and therefore inadequate; the passenger is right to read danger in the storm, but this alone is insufficient (at least for those who wish to sail). A perspective, in short, is at once legitimate and insufficient. Allen effectively summarizes what we then need for a comprehensive (non) perspective: “more adequate readings of that with which we are in contact, not an abolition of meanings, so that we have things-in-themselves, apart from meanings.”<sup>77</sup>

To gain a comprehensive understanding of a situation is thus a matter of assuming a posture of absolute openness to it such that we can assimilate ourselves to more and more meaning-full points of view.<sup>78</sup> This, as we have seen, involves a continuous process of detachment, but such detachment serves to help us avoid the trap of forming particular attachments; its purpose is not to achieve a kind of intellectualized surveillance. To refer again to the example of the ship in the storm, comprehensive contact with the meaning of the world does not require knowledge of sailing, much less an infinite knowledge of all types of historical and potential marine navigation. Weil certainly thinks that intelligence

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>78</sup> I develop this point in the section on neighbour love below.

and erudition are useful (or at least she seems to most of the time)<sup>79</sup> but they are not the point; she says that “the intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his cell,” for on its own, one’s intelligence merely reinforces the strength of one’s limited perspective (SE 26). Instead, the point is to put one’s whole self in a position that is not one’s own and to do so simultaneously with all other positions. Weil writes: “The world is a text containing several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by an effort – an effort in which the body always participates” (N 23). Here she describes a profoundly affective task, involving the entire self, including the body.<sup>80</sup> We are to pull ourselves from one ek-static encounter of the world to another (which is to work to compose one simultaneous and comprehensive encounter from each of these positions) without becoming attached to any of them, so as to have an entirely unguarded contact with the universe.

We get a sense of the tensional and esoteric (non) posture this “grasping simultaneously several superimposed rows of ideas” requires when Weil writes that often “by asserting a truth on a certain plane you destroy it. As soon as you have announced it (or announced it on a certain plane) it is no longer true. It is only true behind (above) the contrary assertion” (N 80; cf. 163).<sup>81</sup> We can observe this in the form of Weil’s work; indeed, this is how she describes her “method of investigation: As soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true” (GG 156). Weil often

---

<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, Weil’s calls to be reduced to “vegetative matter” would seem to suggest that intelligence may in fact act as a hindrance to comprehensive contact with the world. See, e.g., FLN 234-235. At the same time we can also conclude with certainty from this that Weil does not mean omniscience when she refers to a total perspective.

<sup>80</sup> For more on training the body’s habits and rhythms so as to become one with the universe see N 42-47.

<sup>81</sup> This is, for Weil, the *raison d’être* of esotericism.

states and works through competing perspectives (such as detachment from and contact with the world) so as to find a unity on another plane. Likewise, she works to keep herself off-balance, reserving many of her harshest criticisms for those people, cultures, and institutions to which, by inclination or heritage, she most belongs (France, Roman classicism, the Catholic Church, Judaism, Marxism) while often offering praise for that which is foreign to her, neglected by her culture, or set against the institutions she most belongs to (England, Indian religions, Egyptian religions,<sup>82</sup> peasant labour, the Languedoc civilization). I suggest that we understand what Weil is doing with these moves as detaching herself from what is familiar while opening herself to what is distant, so as to be able to truthfully receive beings who are both near to and far from her. In a consonant move, when Weil claims that “[o]nly an indirect method is effective,” she is referring to this continuous process of voiding any attachment to finite things while opening oneself to being transported into the real via the infinite multiplicity of perspectives (GG 170-171). We must “draw back before the object we are pursuing” which is the same process as applying our “full attention to the object” (GG 170 and 173).<sup>83</sup>

Weil often describes our task as “forg[ing] the balance”; we have, she writes a “duty to understand and weigh the system of value of other people with one’s own, on the same balance” (N 8). Weil often emphasizes that this balancing does not mean that we should be active adjudicators; indeed, “we must not judge” (GG 146). But neither is she

---

<sup>82</sup> We should here recall France’s colonial history in Egypt.

<sup>83</sup> Weil claims that this is how great art is made. “The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real” (GG 173).

advocating for a relativism that would equate or remove the value from diverse perspectives, writing that “facts... must be shown in their true perspective relatively to good and evil” (NR 229). The solution is to “let all beings come to us, and leave them to judge themselves. We must *be* a balance” (GG 146, my emphasis; cf. N 485). In this way, though “we should be indifferent to good and evil... when we are indifferent, that is to say when we project the light of our attention [and love] equally on both, the good gains the day. This phenomenon comes about automatically. There lies the essential grace” (GG 172).<sup>84</sup> When we become “a centre from which may be seen the different possible readings – and their relationship” without any personal preference, situations judge themselves in front of us (N 47).<sup>85</sup> When one truly holds all perspectives together, without any interference from the position of one’s self, the true value of things shines forth, and there is no need to “think *about*” anything; truth manifests in our pure thought (N 187). To use another of Weil’s images, those who are perfect become an image of the world, reflecting both its good and its evil so that both are clearly seen for what they are.<sup>86</sup> In other words, this balance of perspectives that we are to become is so acute that our own operations of perception cease and we are assimilated to the real.

Weil often describes this state of balance and the training by which we achieve it as “attention.” She argues:

---

<sup>84</sup> See also N 234: “‘Judge not.’ Christ himself does not judge. He is judgement. Suffering innocence as measuring-rod. Judgement, perspective. In this sense, every judgement judges him who pronounces it [by enacting the perspective that we come from]. Not to judge. It is not indifference or abstention, it is transcendent judgement, the imitation of divine judgement, which is impossible for us; but [Christ calls us to] ‘be ye perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.’”

<sup>85</sup> This is connected to Weil’s understanding of the virtue of humility, which is to learn a non-preference for oneself. See N 239.

<sup>86</sup> See N 268: The good and the wicked are to an equal degree parts of the world. But the perfect alone are the image of it as well. Balance and sieve.”



The will of God. How to know it? This will manifest as an action beyond all motive. We must tear desire away from perspective. If we produce a stillness in ourselves, if we silence all desires and opinions and if with love, without formulating any words, we bind our whole soul to think ‘thy will be done’, the thing which after that we feel convinced we should do (even though in certain respects we may be mistaken) is the will of God. For if we ask him for bread he will not give us a stone. (N 233; cf. p. 492)

It is with attention that we come to work passively (rather than actively from ourselves); the sheer necessity of the good acts through us as we direct all of our attention towards it.<sup>87</sup> Because attachment to limited beings closely resembles this, attention takes the form of self-silencing and ceaseless inner supplication; it knows it has reached its end when it encounters no-thing but silence.<sup>88</sup> Weil is not here speaking of emotions or “inner feelings”; for these remain the individual’s feelings (GG 101). Revelation, in contrast “floods the *whole* soul,” taking over it with “inner purity, inspiration, [and] truth of thought” that are independent of any personal motivation or attachment (GG 169).<sup>89</sup> In one of her most comprehensive accounts of this, Weil says that we must simply keep on looking, not to interpret, but “to look...till the light suddenly dawns.... With time we are altered and if, as we change, we keep our gaze directed toward the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible” (GG 174).

---

<sup>87</sup> See GG 91: “We should do only those righteous actions which we cannot stop ourselves from doing, which we are unable not to do, but, through well-directed attention, we should always keep on increasing the number of those which we are unable not to do.”

<sup>88</sup> See GG 181: “Uninterrupted interior prayer is the only perfect criterion of good and evil.” And p. 166: “It is when from the innermost depths of our being we need a sound which does mean something, when we cry out for an answer and it is not given us, it is then that we touch the silence of God.” And WG 7: “For the action of grace in our hearts is secret and silent.”

<sup>89</sup> See also WG, 22; GG 150 and 169.

Thus the ascent through multiple perspectives results in the absence of any perspective: a completely impersonal absorption into the universe. One of Weil's more fragmentary passages speaks to this.

Without name and without form. Consideration of the starry heavens. To see the mass of stars, a formless mass – that doesn't mean anything [and is therefore insufficient]. But to see forms [e.g., constellations] is yet a lower form of perception. [The point] is to see an order without form. Hence, to see the form is a degradation....

Not to read. To read the non-reading.

Highest art. Order without form or name. Negation of form in all great art....

Poetry. Images and words that reflect the mental state without images or words.

Music. Sounds that reflect the mental state without sounds....

Composition on several planes, connection with order without form?

Several planes | non-reading (without name or form) | presence....

The unity of several forms is not a form.

The presentation of several forms in the same object lifts the spectator (the reader) above form. (N 63)

In a later essay Weil develops similar themes specifically in regard to language.

It is always language that formulates opinions, even when there are no words spoken. The natural faculty called intelligence is concerned with opinion and language. Language expresses relations; but it expresses only a few, because its operation needs time.... At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in a prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulable, although they are perfectly rigorous and clear.... So the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth...without ever being able so much as to glance at what is outside.... The mind which is enclosed within language can possess only opinions. The mind which has learned to grasp thoughts which are inexpressible because of the number of relations they combine, although they are more rigorous and clearer than anything that can be expressed in the most precise language, such a mind has reached the point where it already dwells in truth. (SE 25-27)

The point is that any sort of form, such as the form of language, represents the imposition of an interpretation that modifies and organizes (according to personal desires) our encounter with reality (see GG 102). It is the unity of all forms that ultimately abolishes

form, allowing us to transcend beyond limits. The “perfect detachment” of the unity of perspectives “alone enables us to see things in their naked reality, outside the fog of deceptive values” (GG 100). To return to the point of impersonal relations, any imposition of form or prejudice onto others represents a (personal) limit to the total openness to their reality that is required of us.

This brings me, finally, to an explicit discussion of the importance of weakness and death in Weil’s accounts of impersonal relationships. For we see here that impartial love – the only valid form of love – requires restraint and renunciation, a refusal to act from any position, which will necessarily be an imposing position of strength. To love beyond power means that we must love from beyond the self, which means we must love from beyond the death of our personal perspective.

We get a better sense of this absolute weakness when we realize that Weil does not believe that the forms and formations of which we must rid ourselves are peripheral to the human being; that we are, in essence, unencumbered minds observing neutral material at a distance and are only secondarily mired in attachments and contexts. Instead, Weil provides us with perceptive descriptions of human life that reveal the extent to which we are bound up with and fully engaged in a world of relationships that we form and that forms us; that is, Weil shows that the individual as an acting agent is only intelligible when understood “as formed in a context by language, traditions, moral and religious practices, and more.”<sup>90</sup> Much of the last two chapters of *The Need for Roots* (1943) are, for example, unintelligible unless one recognizes this point about human

---

<sup>90</sup> Richard H. Bell, “Introduction: Divine Humanity: Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture*, 6.

nature and its need for roots, as the introduction to the second chapter illustrates well enough.

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.... A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part. (NR 43)<sup>91</sup>

We are, in short, irreducibly formed and forming beings. We cannot think without language, perceive without concepts, or act without culture.

So, we cannot function without form and yet we must learn to love without form. The difficulty here is fundamentally one of our having a limited perspective. This is how Weil describes our situation. “Just as God, being outside the universe, is at the same time the center, so each man imagines he is situated in the center of the world. The illusion of perspective places him at the center of space...arrang[ing] a whole hierarchy of values around him” (WG 99). This irreducible position affects even our sense of being and existence: “being seems to us less and less concentrated the farther it is removed from us” (WG 99). The attachments that we form and that falsify our reality stem from the fact that we approach the world from a particular time and place with particular wants and needs that inform particular readings of the world.<sup>92</sup> Put more strongly, Weil argues that we lie to ourselves as the necessary condition of seeing ourselves and our limited perspective as something (N 44). In short, as limited beings, we approach the world from a perspective

---

<sup>91</sup> For some of the similar explicit articulations of these arguments see NR 204-205 and 212.

<sup>92</sup> See pp.38-41 above.

when in fact “all points in the world are equally centers and...the true center is outside the world” (WG 100).

It follows that our inability to function without form is precisely the point: it is only when we cease to function as an individual with a perspective that we can truly love the world. In the self-denial that is love, we must “give up our imaginary position as the center..., renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul” (WG 100). To thus lose our perspective – bound up as it is with particular needs and attachments –constitutes nothing less than no longer occupying a particular vantage point in the universe: “Being rooted and grounded in love that [we] may be able to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length, and depth, and height” of the universe means that we must “be rooted in the absence of a definite place,” and therefore involves the renunciation of all desiring and forming activity that makes up a point of view (N 300). We must be uprooted, Weil argues, from all particular locations in order to be rooted in eternity (N 310).

Weil often puts this in terms of renouncing our “power to say ‘I’” (N 336). This ability, she claims, is “the one and only free act that lies open to us” as creatures, and as such it must “be offered up to God, that is to say, destroyed” (N 337). In this offering we mimic God’s own act of love, for, in Weil’s understanding, God’s act of creation is one of allowing the universe to exist independently through loving self-renunciation. In our ability to say ‘I,’ which is our sizing up of the world from a point of view, we have “an imaginary likeness of God’s power, an imaginary divinity”; imitating God’s renunciation, we must “cast aside that resemblance to God which makes us kings and masters of the

world in thought” (WG 99 and N 221). The point is not simply that we must refrain from overt coercion in our relationships with others. Rather, just as all attachments represent a dependence on and infringement upon the other, so also we must renounce “what we are” as actively engaged perceivers and actors in the world – being persons who say ‘I’ – if we are to avoid the violence of seeking to form the world (N 273).

It is in this spirit that Weil argues that if we are to truly love then we must renounce even those things that we know and “feel [are] conducive to spiritual well-being” (GG 57). When it comes to renouncing the particular things of the world, Weil points out, “the difficulty is that the limited forms of good – ways of living, satisfaction of material needs, one’s family, friends, etc. – all this is necessary to us; we draw our vital energy from it [and when we lack these things] a real hunger is produced” (N 492). But that which enhances our wellness *as a limited being* is, ultimately, of no help at all in achieving the illimitable. When someone raises herself, he or she reduces herself to being the self, and thus, for Weil, even genuine nourishment constitutes a blocking off of the fullness of reality, which we can only receive when we enter into the void or absolute nothingness which is desire without fulfilment (see N 244). Weil even claims that “the lighting up of our nature by [genuine] grace is in no way desirable” as it decreases the extent to which we, as limited beings, face suffering in the world (N 343).<sup>93</sup> And so, for example, she thinks that “the death of beings near to us is a purification” (N 271). Likewise, one page after distinguishing cities from the social element that she so often critiques and praising these cities as that which give us “contact with nature, the past,

---

<sup>93</sup> Weil phrases this as a question.

tradition,” Weil claims that we must go into exile from these genuine homes: “one must uproot oneself... [and] have no native land on this earth that one may call one’s own” (N 296, 298).<sup>94</sup> Nothing of us remains, Weil concludes, “when we have renounced everything [in us] which is dependent upon external things,” when we have renounced all home and belonging, which make up a particular existence in the world (N 120). Total deprivation dispels any illusion that our perspective gives us a true vantage point upon reality (N 61). So, in deprivation we embrace the truth about ourselves, which is that “as a creature...I am nothing.... I have to love to be nothing” (N 262).

We must love our essential nothingness because in this nothingness lies our potential for love beyond perspective and attachment. As Weil explains, we desire only “the truly illimitable” from which we might receive perfect love, and yet we are “limited in so far as [we are] other than God” (N 100, 99). There is an absolute gulf between our being and what we (rightly) desire; Weil quips, following up on the previous quotation, that “in the in so far lies the difficulty” (N 99). However, it is when we consent to being nothing that the limited being is entirely effaced, such that we “can, under the sway of circumstances, become anything whatever” (N 289).<sup>95</sup> Put differently, we must be oriented towards death because, precisely in it being the ultimate exhibition of our limits, death is “the annihilation of the limited being” (N 10).<sup>96</sup> Once annihilated, the limited

---

<sup>94</sup> This renunciation, of course, does not mean that we are not to love limited things; Weil means for us to love other beings as limited things rather than as the infinite other. However, the point here is that being in a position to receive some sort of genuine personal good from or have some sort of personal connection with limited things already constitutes loving them as though they were eternal.

<sup>95</sup> On the non-being of the limited see N 79.

<sup>96</sup> See also N 48: “We should place ourselves at the centre from whence the unlimited commands all values – Read our own system of values – Detach ourselves from it. And thence (being the unlimited in thought) desire our own death.”

being can no longer stand in the way of what is real, no operation on our part can interfere with what will be an entirely uninhibited contact with reality; therefore, “truth is on the side of death” (160-161). Only when we are “naked and dead” can we also kill the imagination that destroys our ability to be a just balance (GG 139). We thus pass from self-annihilation to immortality; ceasing to be we are seized by the infinite – Weil at times describes “the decreed ‘I’” as the Holy Spirit – and can love beyond power and partiality (N 264; cf. p. 330). In sum, as a finite being I am unable to love God, but through grace I disappear “and God loves himself by way of the creature, which empties itself [and] becomes nothing” (N 331).

Here we can see the central role of affliction in Weil’s thought, for affliction keeps God distant and thereby immolates our desires and attachments. It “lays bare the paltry character of [any] attachment,” and thereby offers us the cure of an unchecked reality (N 224; cf. p. 313). It is not that Weil thinks that affliction is meaningful, but rather that in the sheer meaninglessness of the suffering it brings it is “a device for pulverizing the soul” and experientially revealing our “non-being” (SE 27). For in the state of affliction, we are like “a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cog-wheel” (SE 27).

The example of the workman in the machine is no accident; Weil often writes about the debilitating effects on one’s self of performing industrialized labour and especially the devastating manner by which industrialized labour obliterates the worker’s orientation in time (e.g., SE 17-18). She often performs this analysis as a social critique and offers up creative alternatives for creating work that would be humane, interesting,



and meaningful. However, Weil also often argues that because this inhumane labour takes us from our fundamental placement in time, it is at once the means by which we might pass to eternity. This is why Weil concludes *The Need for Roots* (1943) with the call for us to reduce ourselves “to the absolute passivity of inert matter” through back-breaking and soul-annihilating labor, even as most of the preceding pages detail the ways that our culture might recover roots that will give us orientation to the past and the future (NR 296; cf. N 78-79). It is only when we are “matter not having any form of its own, completely docile [and] fluid,” when we are, to put it again, “anonymous...human material,” that we can “discard the illusion of being in possession of time” (N 336, 217-218). To thus bring the “soul into conformity with the flow of time” is to surrender any active consciousness and be fully present in the eternal “plenitude of the present” (N 265, 311). Completely present, we accept, in our lack of consciousness, every fact and event in God’s universe, and thereby are totally obedient to, and in fact absorbed into, the impulsion of God’s impartial love. Weil puts the point sparsely and directly: “Exhaustion in the course of labour. Complete absence of hope. Condition for charity” (N 79).

### **Part II.1 Neighbour love**

In this section we will see how Weil’s understanding of attentive love both finds much of its source and inspiration in her thinking about the love of other people in the forms of neighbour love and friendship.

One sees almost immediately in her work that the importance for Weil of entering into others’ points of view through loving attention and the renunciation of oneself is not

an abstract or theoretical work. Though much of her work is indeed boldly universal, her accounts of a resolutely universal love stem from particular visions of beauty, immersion in particular religious practices, and especially her particular encounters with suffering human beings. Perhaps no experience that she describes demonstrates this more clearly and impacted her thought more profoundly than the year she spent working in a factory.

As she writes,

as I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul. Nothing separated me from it, for I had really forgotten my past and I looked forward to no future, finding it difficult to imagine the possibility of surviving all the fatigue.... There I received forever the mark of a slave. (WG 25)

Here we see ‘exhaustion in the course of labour’ as the condition for the kind of charity and compassion that allows for a complete, but at the same time impersonal, experience of the suffering of others.

Attention is thus, for Weil, the substance of neighbour love: in directing pure attention towards another, the full reality of that person sinks into the core of our being. As she puts it, “to know (know with one’s whole soul!) that others actually exist constitutes what is most precious and most desirable” (N 51). Weil often claims that “only the existence of those we love is fully recognized” and that love is the only organ by which we can truly be in contact reality (GG 113). This is because a purely intellectual acknowledgement of something (such as another person) still fails to place this thing meaningfully within our world; it remains a shadow outside of our affective experience, like the existence of those victims of a (temporally or spatially) distant tragedy we read about in the paper while we are more concerned about the quality of the cup of coffee we

are drinking.<sup>97</sup> It seems that it is for similar reasons that Weil claims that neighbour love must go beyond “warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity”; all fall short of truly seeing the other, either by generalizing suffering or by turning the sufferer into an object, “an anonymous means,” for a self-satisfying charity (WG 64 and NR 156). Instead, Weil points towards a full embrace of the particular existence of others: “the love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to [the sufferer]: ‘what are you going through?’ It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled ‘unfortunate’ but as a man.... This way of looking is first of all attentive” (WG 64-65).

At its most straightforward, such attention means recognizing the other person as a being with perspective. This is to fully dwell within a world in which love allows us to see that the other has as much right to say ‘I’ as I do, that others exist no more and no less than I do (N 8). As beings with perspectives, each person is not an object in the world but a unique point of view of the world and should be valued as such. As Weil puts it, “we should have with each person the relationship of one conception of the universe to another conception of the universe, and not to a part of the universe” (N 24). Such a recognition of other persons, must come from a decidedly impersonal space in order to maintain complete impartiality and universality. “Love your enemies,” Weil writes. “Recognize the fact that they are ‘I’s” (N 295).

The difficulty with this is that under the laws of force each person does *not* have the same right to say ‘I’ as all others: whomever is more effectively able to manipulate

---

<sup>97</sup> My inspiration for this example comes from Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, pp. 120-121.

force can make his or her perspective dominant. Thus, Weil modifies the classical understanding of justice, which she tells us is mutual consent between two equal will. Beyond such classical justice, what Weil calls “the supernatural virtue of justice consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the 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 a condition of matter” (WG 87). This is to preserve for each person “the free disposal of himself,” which is his (or her) ability to consent to everything that happens to his or her person (WG 132). This is not to act in ignorance of power, according oneself to an illusory equality; it is instead to see clearly the imbalances of power, but to locate true divinity outside of power relations and in loving restraint. For to “not command wherever one has the power to do so” is to place “the good outside this world” (WG 91). We are incontrovertibly limited by our materiality and the material objects around us; to practice supernatural charity and justice is to see other human beings as sufficiently limited that our respect for them limits us in an equally non-negotiable manner, even if it is within our material power to trample them. Perfect love is the withdrawal of oneself in order to preserve the other.

Weil argues that we have contact with this good that is outside of this world, which manifests in the absolute respect for the consent of others, in the innate and indomitable expectation we all have that others will do good to us (SE 10). When we translate this to what the other expects of us we find ourselves under an eternal “obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being” (NR 5). For simply knowing that another is a person carries with it “the

knowledge the if someone were to put out his eyes, his soul would be lacerated by the thought that harm was being done to him” (SE 10). Such harm, Weil continues, provokes the cry ‘why am I being hurt?’ which is totally alien to a jealous agitation for one’s rights (SE 10-11). Weil again describes our encounter with this eternal sacredness in others as the moment of hesitation we experience before trying to overcome another person as a material obstacle (Iliad 15). This hesitation is our response the other who is “silently clamour[ing] to be read otherwise” and it is supernatural justice awakened within us that is “not...deaf to such cries” (N 43).

Such a recognition of others requires a radically asymmetrical love, in which all regard for ourselves is sacrificed for the other. Weil writes that “to be innocent is to bear the weight of the entire universe. It is to throw away the counterweight,” which is the power we might yield against the power that confronts us (GG 144). In this vein, Weil describes forgiveness as “accept[ing] the lack of balance. To see [in absolute forgiveness] the image of the essential lack of balance” (N 136). We are, in other words, to meet a world of force with non-compensatory love for even the weakest and most vulnerable persons, making ourselves vulnerable in their stead. Fittingly, examples of sacrificial love and acts of justice that have little (or no) hope of victory figure prominently in Weil’s writing about the true greatness of supernatural love and justice, the most common of which is Christ’s crucifixion.

However, this love is not an essential lack of balance; it is a disequilibrium enacted upon a false equilibrium for the sake of true balance. Weil follows up her comments on the imbalance of forgiveness like this: “To seek for balance on another

plane, or (and) within a wider compass” (N 136). This balance is one in which the conditions and possibilities for each person’s consent over their person is maximized and preserved (so that each person can freely give him- or herself over to God). Within this balance we also practice an impersonal love towards ourselves, seeking to create the conditions whereby we might freely consent to the will of God. “To love a stranger as oneself implies the reverse: to love oneself as the stranger” (GG 111). Ultimately, such a balance accords with what Weil describes as the true balance of the universe of force, in which “these innumerable blind forces are limited, made to balance one against the other, brought to form a united whole” (NR 11).

Almost immediately after giving her definition of supernatural justice in the essay “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” (1940-1942), Weil states: “He from whom the act of generosity proceeds can only behave as he does if his thought transports him into the other” (WG 90). In other words, one can only recognize the existence of another person in the full sense described by Weil by “putting oneself in his place,” in an “identification...through love” (N 292, 323). We have already seen that, for Weil, in order to truly see and embrace reality we must come to embody multiple perspectives. Here we see that we must do this for the sake of and out of love, for compassion has as its source and end a complete abandon into the other. “Compassion,” Weil writes, “for those that are cold and hungry implies the ability to conceive and imagine oneself as being placed in any sort of social and material circumstances whatsoever, and consequently the casting aside of the circumstances in which one finds oneself” (N 282). Thus we see again, perhaps in a more pointed way, that it is a state of nothingness that makes true love

possible. Compassionate transport into the other “means nakedness” to this other; it implies “a spiritual quartering, a stripping of the self; conceiving oneself as oneself *and* other” (N 282 and 292). For it is necessary that “the soul empt[y] itself of all its own contents [and circumstances] in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (WG 64).

Such openness and receptivity towards others, in which truth and love are one, combines full acceptance of the reality of others’ suffering and suffering on their account as one and the same thing.<sup>98</sup> It is, Weil argues, “the refusal to accept for oneself the possibility of suffering which places an obstacle in the way of compassion”; such a refusal is either unable to acknowledge uncompensated and unconsolated suffering or else places such suffering within an objective purview, as if one were an observer, removed from such suffering (N 284). Weil writes that “revolt consists in averting one’s eyes.... Acceptance,” she continues, “is nothing else than a quality of attention” (N 287). This acceptance is our unconditional submission to what Weil describes as “the condition of human misery” through the attentive and pure “contemplation of the woes of others” (N 285, 297).

This involves a further death to oneself, a humble exposure of our own weaknesses and limits, as we do not only deny ourselves so as to take the place of another, but so as to take on his or her suffering. Weil observes that this kind of affective “knowledge of human misery is difficult for the rich man, the powerful man to acquire,

---

<sup>98</sup> See N 284: “To accept the suffering of others, but as suffering; which means in the first place undergoing it oneself.” And p. 293: “To accept the woes of others while at the same time suffering on account of them.”

because he is almost invincibly brought to believe that he is something” (and she further notes that this is likewise the case for the person who in abject poverty thinks the powerful man is something) (N 276). We are, in contrast, completely obliterated when we affectively take the place of the sufferer. As she puts it, “To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction...is to annihilate oneself” (SE 28). We therefore, Weil further argues, must not only put off the false divinities for which we clamour, but even deny the illimitable part of our nature, that we find in death, so that we can experience the full extent of others sufferings.<sup>99</sup> Here we begin to see the extent to which Weil believes that such compassionate love for others is impossible unless we are fully assimilated to the miracle of God’s grace (WG 64, 83-84, 93). For the consent to become the afflicted and descend into their nothingness is to recognize as human that which has been made less than human, to inhabit the place of one who no longer has a proper place or perspective in the world (WG 69-71). Thus loving and “creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist” (WG 92). Love, through suffering and sacrifice – through becoming nothing ourselves – gives us access to what is not there: slaves, the invisible poor, and other disposable objects of the successful wielders of force (WG 76-80, 92-93).

To fully experience the reality, beauty, and fragility of the other effects a bond of compassion that yields no personal attachment. When we truly recognize and inhabit another’s ‘I’, then we cannot desire anything from her for ourselves, but desire only the

---

<sup>99</sup> See N 323: “To put off the false divinity is but a preliminary image. We have to put off the true divinity after having acquired it, as far as this is possible for human nature, through a process of assimilation. We then rediscover the capacity for suffering and the fact of human misery, from which we had been freed.”



fact of her sheer existence; the void that we make of ourselves cancels our desires for compensation and gain (see GG 113-115 and WG 149). Likewise, to love the *reality* of another being is to fully appreciate and accept its essential fragility as something limited; this inspires at once a tender compassion and rids us of our desire to hang onto this being as an immortal or glorious guarantor of ourselves (NR 168-170). We can therefore see why it is that only an impersonal love, a love that neither comes from nor returns to oneself, can truly love another's person. Weil puts the point simply and directly when she states that a happy person who loves wishes "to share the suffering of the beloved who is unhappy" and an unhappy person who loves should be "filled with joy by the mere knowledge that his beloved is happy, without sharing this happiness or even wishing to do so" (GG 112). We likewise see why true joy is fully impersonal, for our joy is comprised of gladly consenting to bear the suffering of the world (e.g., N 291).

It is, also, the impersonality of our love that makes it universal. To be attentive, our compassion must be directed towards particulars, but because we have no personal investment in these particulars nothing prevents the universal outgrowth of such compassion; in fact, pure compassion compels this outgrowth through analogy and transference (N 349, 346). When I love my sick child impersonally, I automatically experience (and act upon) an equal degree of compassion for all sick children; if there is even a small difference in the degree of my compassion, then I can be sure that, to exactly that same degree, the love I bear for my child is bound up in a desire for my own gain. Disinterested openness to the wounds of particular others makes us equally

“vulnerable to the wounds of all flesh, without any exception”; we learn to see “every death” as if it were “one’s own death” (N 281).

When it comes to acts of love, Weil refuses any inner/outer dichotomy. In her understanding, when we fully see the reality of others we act charitably and justly towards them. Likewise, truly charitable and just acts train our souls into a recognition of others by placing us into a space in which they truly exist (e.g., NR 206-211). Weil describes it like this. “The poet produces beauty by fixing his attention on something real. The act of love is produced in the same way. To know that this man, who is cold and hungry, really exists as much as I do myself, and is really cold and hungry – that is enough, the rest follows of itself” (N 449). For this reason, Weil often describes the act of charity, such as the act of feeding the hungry, as “only the sign that one has recognized the existence of the famished individual’s ‘I’ as such” (N 295; cf. 288-289, 293). Central to Weil’s point here is that we should not act charitably from force of will or personal exertion (which invests our person into the situation). Instead, Weil thinks of charity in terms of passivity, the charitable action simply proceeding through us, like the words of an inspired poet (N 293, 298).

What we then truly give in an act of charity, when understood as a sign of our recognition of the other, is precisely this same “recognition that the other man has the right to say ‘I’” (N 295-296). Far more valuable than limited goods (which it may or may not be in our power to give) generous attention can restore to humanity those who have been reduced to matter by force. We have, Weil argues, the power to give back to the afflicted person “a soul begotten exclusively of charity,” which is why “we have to bring

to them in their inert, anonymous condition a personal love,” in the sense that we restore them by recognizing the reality of their particular person (WG 90, 93; cf. 98). We achieve this by ransoming our person for theirs, transporting ourselves into them (see WG 90, N 287). This “is to consent...to the destruction of oneself.... In denying oneself, one becomes capable under God of establishing someone else by a creative affirmation” (WG 91). In continuity with the way such love restores the other, Weil describes the proper response to having received this kind of love as a dignified gratitude. This is not a grovelling subservience; indeed, Weil insists that any feeling of debt on the part of the recipient means that the original gift given was not pure (N 152, 296). The gratitude that Weil describes preserves self-respect because it is impersonal and anonymous; it is a simple beholding of the beauty of justice being done, free from any personal bond (WG 87, 91). Thus, pure charity “establishes a relationship of perfect equality between the two beings” and “breaks down the barrier of force” that stems from personal attachments and investments (N 296).

Some tension may appear here between Weil’s claims (presented above) that we must be reduced to passive matter as a condition of our being able to act charitably and her claim here that in the act of charity we ransom our person (which we presumably had at the beginning of the process) for the other. For now, it is worth keeping in mind that even if this tension is more than simply apparent, Weil’s thinking is here broadly consistent in its theme, emphasis, and direction, all of which link the annihilation of oneself to other-regarding love. It is also worth noting that the assertion of such a tension may reintroduce the kind of inner/outer dualism that Weil’s ethics refuse; there is, in

other words, a circular component to Weil's understanding of charity, wherein attention to another is the condition of charity which is none other than attention to another. In all cases, neighbour love is the emptying of oneself so as to fully receive the other.

## **Part II.2: Friendship**

In what may be a reflection of unresolved tension in Weil's own life and thought, perhaps no aspect of Weil's work is as difficult or elusive as her writings on friendship. On the one hand, she exhibits an extreme degree of suspicion of the validity (or perhaps the possibility) of friendship. In her Marseille notebooks (1941-1942), after stating her great love for her friends, such that she can hardly imagine the world without them, she writes: "I think I must love wrongly; otherwise things would not happen in this way to me. My love would not be attached to a few beings. It would be available for everything that deserves to be loved.... We must gather up our love in ourselves in order to spread it over all things. God alone loves all things, and he only loves himself" (N 206). She likewise writes of the need to carefully guard against the influence of her friends in her own thought and action, and is more generally relentless in her attacks against the distorting influence of "all particular incentives" (N 237; cf. WG 21-22, 28). Even when she does attempt to write constructively about friendship, her arguments almost always come out as negative gestures and descriptions of what pure friendship (as she calls it) is not. Her most sustained treatment of friendship, a section in the essay "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" (1940-1942), is in fact predominantly a critique of relationships of dependence (arguments from which I drew on heavily earlier in this chapter). In

discerning whatever positive vision Weil may have had for friendship, we are left, in this essay and elsewhere, with undeveloped and fragmented ideas, usually in the form of dense, isolated and unexplained statements that often appear to contradict each other.

And yet, on the other hand, the vital role Weil sees for friendship, as “distinct from the love of our neighbour,” is clearly present, and is arguably crucial if we are to understand the (tensional) depth and breadth of Weil’s thinking about human relationships that escape the realm of force (WG 83). In “Forms of the Implicit Love of God” (1940-1942) she includes friendship (with some reservation) as one of these implicit loves of God, alongside with neighbour love, love of the order of the world, and love of religious practices, three themes that receive detailed attention and unreserved praise throughout her writings. At the beginning of this essay’s section on friendship, she writes: “There is however a personal and human love which is pure and which enshrines an intimation and a reflection of divine love. This is friendship” (WG 131). Weil also explicitly expresses the gratitude she has for the friendship others have given to her, especially in her letters to Father Perrin. She even hopes that her friendship with Father Perrin will be of some use to him in helping him to find some worth in the ideas she sends him (WG 53). And if Weil’s various statements on the nature of true friendship are elliptical and appear tensional, this also seems to me to represent the extent to which she felt compelled to return again and again to an idea that she felt was important to properly articulate and develop, perhaps as a result of her own experiences with the beauty of friendship. If Weil’s thoughts on friendship are at times scattered, unclear, and

inconsistent they are also often provocative in their insight and inspiring in the depth of love to which they call us.

In what follows, I will not pretend to either a cohesion or clearly developed depth that I cannot find in the text, though I will at times suggest possible lines of development and resolutions and explanation to problems. Instead, I will present what I can find of Weil's constructive gestures towards a pure friendship, relying heavily on her own words and drawing out the diverse themes that can be found therein. Given the scant attention paid to Weil's work on friendship, such an exercise should prove useful in bringing out the nuance and tension of her understanding of friendship.

First, in what may already be implicit above, Weil suggests that friendship involves (a certain kind of) personal preference, which is why it belongs in a different category than neighbour love.

Preference for some human being is necessarily a different thing from charity. Charity does not discriminate.... Preference for some human being can be of two kinds. Either we are seeking some particular good in him, or we need him. In a general way all possible attachments come under one of these heads. We are drawn toward a thing, either because there is some good we are seeking from it, or because we cannot do without it. (WG 131)

She then illustrates this distinction.

We eat distasteful food, if we have nothing else, because we cannot do otherwise. A moderately greedy man looks out for delicacies, but he can easily do without them. If we have no air we are suffocated; we struggle to get it, not because we expect to get some advantage from it but because we need it. (WG 131)

So much for consumptive relationships based on need. Weil then writes:

[However,] we go in search of sea air without being driven by any necessity, because we like it. (WG 131)

She then immediately returns to a critique of relationships based on need, leaving us to ponder the image of our enjoyment of sea air (as well as, it seems, our enjoyment of food delicacies, though she curiously attributes such taste to greed) as a metaphor for friendship. What is it about this sort of preference that allows it to not only escape Weil's ire but to in fact find favour with her? The fact that such preference does not mire us in relationships of dependency is certainly part of the answer, but given her emphatic comments elsewhere about the need for impartiality it is hard to see this negative reason alone justifying such favouritism. Perhaps she means to clear the space for a certain kind of aesthetic taste in relationships, wherein I may particularly like a painting or an artist but this particular taste does not prevent me from seeing the equal value of other paintings by other artists (which would be judged by an impersonal criteria). In this way it would be "a personal and human love which is pure," that is, a love that is at once preferential and unbiased (WG 131). If this is right, then, for example, in the event of a fire I would not sacrifice other paintings for the sake of the one I favour; if I did I should suspect that a degree of need has crept into my enjoyment of the art work.

However, at the same time, Weil writes that the preference and affection that makes up the bond of friendship *does* contain need. It is, she now argues, how we approach this need that makes friendship pure.

When a human being is attached to another by a bond of affection which contains any degree of necessity [read: need for the other], it is impossible that he should wish autonomy to be preserved in both himself and in the other. It is impossible by virtue of the mechanism of nature. It is, however, made possible by the miraculous intervention of the supernatural. This miracle is friendship. . . . [Friendship] is a supernatural union between two opposites, that is to say, necessity and liberty, the two opposites God combined when he created the world and men.

There is equality because each wishes to preserve the faculty of free consent both in himself and in the other. (WG 134)

So, the “bond of affection” we have in friendship, is a bond of dependency but a dependency that we “supernaturally” do not actualize (WG 134).

Weil does not elaborate on the nature or shape of need within the context of friendship and affection (perhaps because she thinks it is identical to all other bonds of human need). Instead, her arguments in the following paragraphs emphasize the importance of not acting upon our need for the other (rather than on the nature or shape of need within friendship’s affection).

In a perfect friendship...the two friends have fully consented to be two and not one, they respect the distance which the fact of being two distinct creatures places between them.... Friendship is a miracle by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food. (WG 135)

Likewise, from her notebooks (1941-1942):

To soil is to modify, it is to touch. The beautiful is that which we cannot wish to change. To assume power over is to soil. To possess is to soil.  
To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love. (GG 115)

It is pure restraint that unites the contrary terms of our need for our friend and the love we must have for her self-determination, such that

pure friendship...has in it, at the same time as affection, something not unlike a complete indifference. Although it is a bond between two people it is in a sense impersonal. It leaves impartiality intact.... Friendship has something universal about it. It consists of loving a human being as we should like to be able to love each soul in particular of all those who go to make up the human race.... He who knows how to love directs upon particular human beings a universal love. (WG 135-136)



What Weil gives us, in the course of a few pages, is both 1) a vision of friendship that is justifiable and even salutary despite being an example of personal preference (and therefore distinct from universal charity) because it does not contain any need; and 2) a vision of friendship as a bond of need that is justifiable because this need is not acted upon, which makes friendship a properly impersonal relationship and a model for the universal charity that we owe to everyone. Despite the presence of these two distinct and seemingly incompatible arguments, it certainly seems as though Weil is trying to present one unified understanding of friendship. In another context she closely links these two separate sets of ideas.

I think that there is a question of friendship, a personal friendship between two beings, by which God's friends should be bound each to each. Friendship is the one legitimate exception to the duty of only loving universally. Moreover, to my way of thinking, it is not really pure unless it is so to speak surrounded on all sides by a compact envelope of indifference which preserves a distance. (WG 50-51)

It is not, however, immediately clear, either here or in "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" (1940-1942) whether or how the two kinds of arguments she develops about friendship might be reconcilable.

I suggest that we might find at least the potential for unifying Weil's understanding of friendship in her various statements (outside of "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" [1940-1942]) to the effect that the simple existence of our friends gives us all that we truly need from them. From her Marseille notebooks (1941-1942):

It is an act of cowardice to seek from (or to wish to give) the people we love any other consolation than that which works of art give us, which help us through the mere fact that they *exist*. To love and to be loved only serve mutually to render this existence more concrete, more constantly present to the mind. But it should be present as the source of our thoughts not as their object. If there are grounds

for wishing to be understood, it is not for ourselves but for the other, in order that we may exist for him. (GG 114)

Likewise:

Such is the price of chaste love. Every desire for enjoyment belongs to the future [likely because it is into the future that we project the fulfillment of our desires] and the world of illusion, whereas if we desire only that a being should exist, he exists: what more is there to desire? The beloved being is then naked and real, not veiled by an imaginary future [composed by our need].... In this sense, and on condition that it is not turned toward a pseudo immortality conceived on the model of the future, the love we devote to the dead is perfectly pure. For it is the desire for a life which is finished that can no longer give anything new. We desire that the dead man should have existed, and he has existed. (GG 115)

And at the end of a letter to Father Perrin:

Once I have gone, it seems to me very improbable that circumstances will allow me to see you again one day. As to eventual meetings in another world, you know that I do not picture things to myself in that way. But that does not matter very much. It is enough for my friendship with you that you exist. (WG 18)

Following up on her comment that this is similar to how we ought to appreciate art, let us consider also some of her comments on the apprehension of beauty.

Beauty is the supreme mystery of this world. It is a gleam which attracts the attention and yet does nothing to sustain it. Beauty always promises, but never gives anything; it stimulates hunger but has no nourishment for the part of the soul which looks in this world for sustenance. It feeds only the part of the soul that gazes. While exciting desire, it makes clear that there is nothing in it to be desired, because the one thing we want is that it should not change. If one does not seek means to evade the exquisite anguish it inflicts, then desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention. (SE 29)

Desire gradually turns into love as we learn a different sort of satisfaction in the part of our soul that does not belong to this world, which is at once a renunciation of satisfaction, in the simple fact of the beloved's existence. Perhaps this transformation into the simple enjoyment of the other's existence parallels in some ways Weil's earlier claims about our

preferential enjoyment of sea air. The challenge would then be to transform bonds of need into bonds of a personal enjoyment that reach beyond any hope for personal satisfaction or fulfillment; this sort of personal enjoyment would be impersonal insofar as we could not get any sort of personal gain or particular satisfaction from a person, for the beginning and end of our enjoyment is his or her existence; and thus it would be irrelevant to our enjoyment whether we see or hear from this person, or indeed whether he or she is alive or dead.

The bulk of Weil's emphasis in the section on friendship in "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" (1940-1942) is on the imperative for distance in pure friendship, but at the end of the section on friendship she casually indicates the presence of unity in friendship, writing that

it is impossible for two human beings *to be one* while scrupulously respecting the distance that separates them, unless God is present in each of them. The point at which parallels meet is infinity. (WG 137, my emphasis)

Though this is the only acknowledgement in her most extended treatment of friendship that some sort of togetherness exists in friendship, we can see that whatever else it may mean to simply enjoy the existence of a friend, it somehow involves unity with him or her. In another essay, Weil gives more details on the nature of the unity desired by friends.

Lovers or friends desire two things. The one is to love each other so much that they enter into each other and only make one being. The other is to love each other so much that, with half the globe between them, their union will not be diminished in the slightest degree. (WG 74)

Though oneness and distance remain the two contrary terms here the emphasis is on the strength and importance of the friends' union. Furthermore, it appears as though Weil is

using the concept of distance differently, with it signalling the temporal and spatial disturbances that we must, as friends, love through and beyond, and not (the importance of) the ongoing affective and personal separation of our two beings; distance is here something to overcome rather than something to treasure and preserve. Weil's writing, in the same place, on the nature of the Trinity, which she describes as the perfection of the friendship that we strive for (see WG 74, 137), emphasizes these same points.

Before all things, God is love. Before all things, God loves himself. This love, this friendship of God, is the Trinity. Between the terms united by this relation of divine love there is more than nearness; there is infinite nearness or identity. But, resulting from the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion, there is also infinite distance....

The love between God and God, which in itself *is* God, is this bond of double virtue: the bond that unites two beings so closely that they are no longer distinguishable and really form a single unity and the bond that stretches across distance and triumphs over infinite separation. [In] the unity of God...all plurality disappears. (WG 75)

It is, again, not entirely clear whether or how this unity in friendship that overcomes all distance (and, it seems, difference) ought to be read alongside the friendship that works to preserve the absolute distance and autonomy of the other at all costs, finding its enjoyment (and perhaps a certain kind of unity) in the fact of the separate existence of the other. Let me suggest as one possible starting point Weil's comment about the coincidence of solitude and togetherness.

Do not allow yourself to be imprisoned by any affection. Keep your solitude. The day, if it ever comes, when you are given true affection there will be no opposition between interior solitude and friendship, quite the reverse. It is even by this infallible sign that you will recognize it. (GG 117)

Weil does not elaborate, but her claim is richly suggestive. I imagine she means to evoke something along the lines of the perfect freedom we feel to be ourselves around certain

people, freer at times than we feel when we are alone. The harmony of distance and unity, then, is in the fact that we are as close to such people as we are to ourselves, and that it is precisely this perfect closeness that gives us our freedom. We might extrapolate further and link this to Weil's earlier point about letting the other simply exist, for here our closeness to the other finds its fulfillment – its "true affection" – in the other also finding the freedom to be his- or herself.

Weil, finally, makes a number of statements related to friendship that, rather than advocating unity beyond plurality or maintaining separation through restraint, praise interaction and exchange between people. In *The Need For Roots* (1943) she often praises the ties of local culture and local life for precisely this reason.

A degree of reality superior even to that of action is attained by the organization which coordinates actions, when such an organization has not been formed artificially, but has grown up like a plant in the midst of day-to-day necessities.... This constitutes, perhaps, the highest possible degree of reality.... [Such an organization] can be a living, warm environment, full of friendly intercourse, companionship and kindness – that is the sort of humus in which the unfortunate French, uprooted by the disaster [of the Nazi occupation] can live and find their salvation both in war and in peace. (NR 211-213)

In a similar vein, we find comments scattered throughout her writing (often interpretations of Matt. 18:20) on the potential of small gatherings of people.

'When two or three are gathered together in my name.' Not just one. But not a hundred either. Two or three.'  
Why...have colloquies between two or three never been recognized among religious exercises? Not talks, but colloquies pursued with the maximum concentration of attention. This would no doubt be of as much value...as reciting the breviary. (N 240)

Likewise:

‘When *two or three* shall be gathered together in my name...’ This is to eliminate the social element. – Two or three only: Socratic tradition. (N 290, Weil’s ellipses)

And:

Everybody knows that really intimate conversation is only possible between two or three. As soon as there are six or seven, collective language begins to dominate. That is why it is a complete misinterpretation to apply to the Church the words ‘whosoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ Christ did not say two hundred, or fifty, or ten. He said two or three. He said precisely that he always forms the third in the intimacy of the *tete-a-tete*. (WG 35)

The recurring theme here of the value of ‘really intimate conversation’ complete with mutual learning and Socratic exchange suggests a give-and-take meeting of two distinct parties who share with and even influence each other. The nature of the unity we seek, in these passages suggests a value in interacting plurality over either solitude or undifferentiated unity. Intimate relationships, in short, look (if only for a moment) to have a certain value in themselves.

We see similar themes in some of Weil’s articulations of the Trinity (again, as an ideal for human relationships) that are notably, distinct from the passage I quoted above.

Trinity – God’s relationship to himself – Things are not related to anything – man is related to something other. God alone is related to himself. Narcissus aspires to what is only possible for God. God alone knows and loves himself. This relationship is his very essence. This relationship is the fullness of being.

Distinct persons: he himself has a relationship analogous to that between one man and another man. But far from this relationship being an abstraction with regard to terms, it possesses as much reality [or even more?]....

The meaning of the Trinity is that God is *thought*. All thought has a subject and an object. The Father thinks his word....

God one, purely one, is *object* – Old Testament – Koran. God one and three is *thought*. (N 263-264, Weil’s brackets and emphasis)

This passage is best read together with Weil’s claim from a few pages earlier that

God can never be an object, and it is in this sense that he is loving before being loved. (N 259)

The point most relevant to our purposes here is that in order to be love (and in order to be thought), God must be relationship. Such a relationship is not an object because it is necessarily ongoing activity and interaction between distinct parties.

It is difficult to know how to receive such arguments, such visions of bountiful exchange between persons. It is not only that such a vision seems to cut against Weil's other emphases in her writing on friendship on the importance of preserving distance and the separate (indeed, autonomous and self-determining) existence of each party. It is even more so that it is not clear how such claims about relationships of mutual influence cohere with Weil's relentless attacks on all forms of attachment and her repeated insistence that any sort of presence of one's own person when meeting and receiving the other can only distort and disfigure the purity of the other's existence. To reach for a kind of synthesis wherein we each find our truest existence in active relationships with each other would require one to discount wide swaths of Weil's writing and one of her central ideas concerning the truthful meeting and apprehension of others.

We may find some indication of how we might proceed in one of Weil's most conclusive statements about the kind of loving and non-disfiguring impact we can have on others.

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. (GG 113)

Here we do not merely form and influence the other; Weil goes so far as to say that we re-create him (or her). However, we do so properly (that is, while continuing to love the beloved ‘just as he is’) only because this love has ascended to and passed through the fire of God’s love. Weil does not explain why this is the case, but I think that the most plausible explanation is that, having passed through God’s love, there is no self or creature left to take part in this re-creating love; the created self has consented to its own death in order to love the beloved as the infinite. It is worth keeping in mind that Weil does not just present the triune God as a model for our relationships, but also as the means by which we love; we are to cease operation so that God’s love of Godself can pass through us unhindered. It would then be this love, God’s illimitable love, that loves the beloved, the relationships we form with others disappearing in identity with the supreme relationship that is God.

The topic of friendship in Weil’s writing expands and diverges from Weil’s account of neighbour love in important ways, opening some possibility for enjoying the company of particular others, suggesting the validity of a closeness with others that coincides with our freedom, and presenting diverse human relationships, full of interaction and exchange, as itself a good. It is not always clear what to do with these themes in the context of Weil’s thought, but if we are to understand Weil it is important to keep in mind the high value she clearly placed in her own life on meaningful relationships of exchange, care, and love with particular people. At the same time, we see many familiar themes resurface in new ways. These include the importance of restraint in our approach of the other and of avoiding bonds of attachment, the importance of



receiving the other in his or her own independent existence, without interference on our part, and the need to become nothing, to die to our own particular circumstances, desire, and need, if we are to truly meet the other with love.

### **Conclusion**

Weil's understanding of love contains, I think, both insight and problems, depth of thought and deeply tensional ideas. In the next chapter I will return to Vanier, and specifically his understanding of love's weakness, in order to critically engage and address these aspects of Weil's presentation of how we are to love our neighbours and friends. Before I turn to this engagement, there is at least one glaring inconsistency that Weil herself attempts to address, and it is therefore worth attending to here (though I will save for later a consideration of how satisfactory Weil's solutions are). This tension concerns, in essence, whether the human person ought to be valued and loved. Given Weil's repeated emphasis on the need to divest ourselves of our person and, through affliction, to seek the death of ourselves, it is decidedly jarring when she writes of the need to direct a personal love at others that might rescue them from the soul-destroying effects of affliction and restore their ability to say 'I.'

This is a tension that Weil felt keenly. On the topic of her reluctant conclusion that we must accept the affliction of others, she writes "I am uneasy with myself" and prays for God to "forgive me my compassion" (WG 45, 46). She acknowledges this tension more directly while wishing Father Perrin well at the conclusion of a letter. "I wish you all possible good things except the cross; for I do not love my neighbour as

myself, you particularly, as you have noticed.... For with any human being taken individually, I always find reasons for concluding that sorrow and misfortune do not suit him, either because he seems too mediocre for anything so great or, on the contrary too precious to be destroyed” (WG 37).

Further to this, Weil at times offers a resolution to this tension which hinges around the notion of consent. In short, she claims that though our greatest good is in our becoming inert matter, this process is only a good if we consent to it. This is why “there is nothing worse than affliction which destroys the ‘I’ from without, for then one is no longer able to destroy it oneself” (N 337). Our love for others is then justified because it creates conditions in which it is more likely that others will consent to self-annihilation. Weil gives a few different reasons for why our love – our efforts to prevent the affliction of others – creates such favourable conditions. It gives people the time they need to prepare for inevitable affliction (WG 70-71). It preserves for others the independence they need to have to be able to independently renounce their independence (WG 115-116). It extends the amount of time people have to encounter the grace that enables one’s self-annihilation (GG 215). It prevents affliction from breeding evil in those who are not ready to receive it, such as the way that rootlessness leads (most) people to seek security in uprooting others and oppression leads (most) people into either a desire for revenge or an abject servility; distress we are unprepared for tends to drive us to the false transcendence of the collective (N 298, 323; SE 16). Finally, Weil argues that people are far more likely to find the resolve within themselves to seek the impersonal when they find themselves in a place of human warmth that allows them the freedom and time for

solitude, silence, and contemplation; we need roots that we can transfigure into a state of rootlessness (SE 17, N 298-299).

And so, for Weil, the utter weakness of our dissolution is love's genesis and conclusion. I turn now to an engagement with these ideas via Vanier's account of love.

### Chapter Three

#### Communion and the Presence of Others: A Critique of Simone Weil via Jean Vanier

In this chapter, I return to Jean Vanier as a way to critically interrogate Weil's constructive work on how we ought to relate to others. Vanier is a particularly helpful engagement partner for Weil for a number of reasons. First, as we saw in the first chapter, Vanier is to a remarkable degree attentive to the same violences in human relationships as is Weil. He is nearly as relentless as Weil is in critiquing debilitating forms of dependency, dominating modes of charity, and homogenous and self-aggrandizing kinds of sociality. And so, when he gives voice to human dependencies and attachments that he thinks are conducive to our flourishing, he does so with the various ways that this dependency can become warped fully in view. Vanier's positive vision also shares, or nearly shares, many themes with Weil; like Weil, he emphasizes weakness, death, and submission to God. This closeness in their arguments for how we ought to go about our relationships brings their differences into sharper relief, allowing for more nuanced and detailed distinctions.

There is also the fact that Vanier's thinking and writing is overtly and inseparably tied to the story and stories of L'Arche. This matters because of the universal and therefore more abstract nature of Weil's claims about human nature and human relationships. When Weil critiques attachment and dependency, she is not merely pointing out the destructive things that can happen or even most often happen in such relationships, such that we might be wary and work to minimize and undo such violences. She is instead trying to articulate a universal mechanism, wherein all human attachments

necessarily degenerate (through various routes that may seem to be vastly at odds with each other) into the violence of seeking to secure one's place in the world through force. It is impossible to argue definitively against such a style of argument, for any exceptions given to the mechanism laid out can simply be re-inscribed into that mechanism; it is the universally signified, and as such all exceptions, if only we look hard enough to find out what they 'really mean,' will end up proving the rule. An act of charity is *really* an act of selfishness; a sacrificial death is *really* a pursuit of personal immortality; a seemingly healthy attachment between mother and child is *really* an example of a mixture of weakness and selfishness on the part of both parties.<sup>100</sup> The only way, then, to engage with an argument made in this way is to tell a different story; there is no definitive argument to make, but a compelling story can do just that and compels us by more truly resonating with our experience of ourselves and others.<sup>101</sup> The ways in which Vanier's

---

<sup>100</sup> Perhaps we most clearly see the perils of this kind of argument in some of the more clumsily dogmatic forms of psychoanalysis, which incessantly ask the question 'what does it mean' with a view to reading in all actions and expression the universally signified structure of the unconscious. With this kind of argument to deploy, some have, for example, attempted to interpret all aspects of a woman's (or all women's) character and activity in terms of an unconscious penis envy; indeed, some have interpreted Weil's life in this way, her various deeds and writings all taken to signify this unconscious desire. For such psychoanalysts, denials of this condition are themselves part of the condition and only further demonstrate the case, leaving anyone confronted with such an accusation with no way out. Likewise, if I write a piece of music, an 'interpretation' of this music along these lines will discover the signification of my sexual frustration in one section and my compensation for a childhood trauma in another and so forth. There is no way for me to definitively argue against this interpretation; however, to the extent that it is impossible for me to engage with an interpretation, it is also meaningless, as my interpreter could literally say anything just as well.

<sup>101</sup> And likewise, in the case of the interpretation of my piece of music, my only partial recourse is a refusal through re-narration (of myself, my unconscious, and my creation). This is also why, even as they contain perils, transcendental arguments remain important if we are to have any sort of conversation about human nature and human experience. They are the only means we have to narrate our experiences and observations about human behaviour and motivations. Accordingly, I do not mean to dismiss Weil's arguments because of their form; her arguments about the ways that people work in relationships are often insightful, observant, and illuminating. I do mean to highlight that her mode of argument dictates a certain kind of response and that the extreme, sweeping nature of some of her claims warrants the caution that universal claims are often in danger of becoming abstract and disconnected from human experience. For a

thought intersects with his and others' experiences of L'Arche make his work, I contend, the kind of compelling story by which we might engage critically with Simone Weil.

### **Vanier on Communion**

Communion stands at the absolute centre of Vanier's thought. In sharp contrast with Weil, he believes that the giving and receiving of oneself in dependent attachments with others, and as a part of the loving activity of God, is essential to our flourishing. He argues that in today's world we over-emphasize "independence and autonomy through competence and strength"; in doing so we neglect our "more basic need for relationship. We attain human maturity as we live relationships more deeply and become open to others and ready to serve them" (SS 3). For Vanier, the means and end of our calling to be close to Jesus (which is also to find our true selves) is to "form communities of love" and compassion that live "in solidarity with others, particularly the poor" and struggle for peace and justice (SS 59).

Vanier's account of footwashing – both his interpretation of the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet in the gospel of John and his descriptions of ritual and hygienic washing of others' feet at L'Arche – and its "special meaning" effectively illustrates the various facets as well as the richness of Vanier's understanding of communion (SS 11). For Vanier, footwashing is both an instance of communion and generative of communion. It is so special to Vanier and, more generally, to L'Arche for a number of reasons. In L'Arche, footwashing blurs the line between formal liturgical ritual

---

concise account and defence of transcendental arguments see Charles Taylor, "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

and celebration and the habits (the liturgies) of our day to day lives. Footwashing is central to worship in many L'Arche homes and is often a major component of the day, as many people in L'Arche need assistance with their hygienic needs and can also take a long time to bathe. Footwashing is also a fully ecumenical liturgical act in which all can participate; it is not an official sacrament of the Catholic Church, so none are barred on religious grounds, and it does not require language (speaking or comprehension) to communicate meaning. Finally, Vanier emphasizes in detail that footwashing – caringly touching another's feet – is a profoundly corporeal and intimate act. I also think, as I hope to show, that looking at communion through the lens of footwashing brings into focus the differences between Weil and Vanier. Therefore, to present Vanier's understanding of communion, I will follow along with the different movements of his account of footwashing, elaborating from other contexts where it is helpful to do so.

As a way to introduce the importance of footwashing in L'Arche, Vanier describes the communion they are learning to practice at L'Arche at the beginning of the beginning of *The Scandal of Service: Jesus Washes our Feet*.

Community life in L'Arche is founded on heart-to-heart relationships.... We are discovering that relationship begins with an attitude of receptivity, and by welcoming others, listening to them, and trusting them. This leads to communion, which is the to-and-fro of love, where each person gives and each one receives. Communion is a place of mutual trust and respect. It implies humility, openness, vulnerability, a sharing not only of one's gifts and wealth, but also one's poverty and limits. (SS 4)

The 'to-and-fro' love Vanier describes here is an active and engaged relationship, something that only occurs with the full participation of the people involved, for one's love is inextricably bound up with oneself. Vanier elsewhere writes that "community as

such is never an end in itself. It is people and love and communion with God that are the goal” (CG 22). Communion, in other words, is an ongoing work, not a static (or passive) state of being; it is an exchange that requires one’s presence and participation to both receive and give. This presence is vulnerable, to be sure, but unlike Weil, for whom vulnerability in the face of the other tends to signal a subtraction or absence of the self, for Vanier this vulnerability is how we make ourselves more fully present to others (see SS 83). The phrase ‘heart-to-heart relationships,’ which occurs again and again throughout Vanier’s writings, is an attempt to express to full and vulnerable presence. In heart-to-heart relationships, we expose ourselves to others who, if they receive us lovingly and truthfully and do not abuse our generosity of self, expose and offer themselves to us in the very process of receiving.

Vanier notes that in the gospels Jesus’s two significant symbolic actions before his death – the sharing of bread and wine in the last supper and the washing of the feet – both “are gestures of communion and love [in which Jesus] is giving himself” (SS 30). Here we have perhaps the most obvious aspect of a communion centred in the act of footwashing: that in communion, as Jesus tells his disciples after he washes their feet, we must serve one another (see SS 24-25, 32-34). Indeed, what Jesus reveals on the cross is that he belongs to a kingdom in which we “love to the very end,” offering ourselves in service to others (SS 35; cf. SS 43). Furthermore, this service is not merely good deeds done in assistance to others, even at great cost to ourselves. Rather, drawing from the intimacy of the act of footwashing, Vanier emphasizes that we are called to give ourselves to others; that we are to meet them in gentle simplicity, recognizing their



preciousness (see SS 38). In other words, our giving must be deeply personal, our gifts bearing the offer of ourselves with them. Thus, Vanier claims that in washing the disciples' feet Jesus "affirms a personal relationship with each one" of them (SS 35). He describes in detail how "Jesus must have" called each disciple by name, looked at each one with fierce and tender love, and touched their feet with gentle affection (SS 36).

As an offer of ourselves, serving others is always done in the practice and pursuit of communion of selves with others. This is why, even as self-sacrifice figures largely in Vanier's discourse, it never has the last word, with even the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus's death turning out to be, in fact, the ultimate gesture of communion. The footwashing, Vanier argues, is how Jesus "communicate[s] the communion he has with his Father, and that he yearns to live with his disciples" (SS 36). Thus, far from the sort of non-imposing emptying of ourselves into the radically different space of the other that Weil envisions, the other-regarding self-sacrifice Vanier's Jesus enacts and calls us to is full of content, and dangerous content at that. It is an invitation that calls "others to grow spiritually and humanly," a gift to others that builds them up as partners for communion and instigates radical change in their lives, such that they too will offer themselves to others in vulnerability (SS 43). It is especially an offer of relationship, to shatter one's illusions of autonomy and self-sufficiency, and to find one's true strength in allowing one's life to become intertwined with another's (see SS 28). People who mutually give themselves to one another in this way "are there for one another, at each other's service. They listen to one another and are never too busy to be disturbed by the other. They live inside one

another. Their joy is in giving to each other and being in communion with another” (SS 44).

We can see here already that, with Vanier, service is always tightly wound together with different modes of receiving. We must listen to and come to know others, their inner qualities and their inner wounds, if we are to give well. But the point Vanier is making goes beyond this. Because love is communion, Vanier says, receiving the gift of the love of others, bound up with their persons, is an integral component of love itself. Vanier tells us that earlier in his life he had sought “to help others like a superior who knew what to do in order to make others happy” (SS 80). He was, he continues, transformed when he began to live and become close with people with mental handicaps.

As I shared my life with them, I discovered the importance of listening and of communicating through non-verbal as well as verbal language. . . . Raphael and Philippe [the first handicapped people he lived with] and each of the others wanted something else from me [than mere help]: they wanted friendship, which implies understanding. I had to try to listen to their heartbeat, understand their greatest needs, and discover what would help them find meaning in life, and hope and trust in themselves. They led me to communion of the heart. (SS 81; cf. BH 77)

What these people were asking of Vanier was to receive them, to accept the offer of communion they made by offering themselves. In contrast to the assimilation to the other that Weil describes, this receiving meant practicing the “inter-dependence” of friendship, allowing them to become dependent on him even as he would become dependent on them (SS 21). Vanier argues that it is only when we generously receive others and allow them to enhance and affect us with their gifts that we come to mutually alleviate each other’s loneliness and fear. It is in the process of allowing others to impact us and in relying on them that we build them up and validate their worth.

What is perhaps most striking about Vanier's analysis of the footwashing scene is the way that he dwells on the experience of having one's feet washed.<sup>102</sup> For Vanier, this intimate form of receiving often figures as a greater challenge than the service to others that is so often taken as the primary lesson of the footwashing story. When the disciples allow Jesus to wash their feet, even as, Vanier points out, they do not understand what is happening, "each permits Jesus' love to become communion, in other words, for love to be given and received, for love to be shared," opening up their feet and their hearts to Jesus (SS 36). It involves an intimate vulnerability, a willingness to open up before a particular other. This challenges our ego far more profoundly than many modes of generosity, which as we saw in Chapter One often re-inscribe existing power relations. To give generously can be a sort of heroism, wherein we try to hide our limits from ourselves and others, and become the bountiful and inexhaustible source of good things. To consent to communion, to allow one's feet to be washed, is to accept one's limits by not only acknowledging, but embracing and leaning into one's dependence on others. Before the disciples are able to serve, they must allow Jesus to wash their feet. When Peter objects, Jesus insists that "to have one's feet washed by Jesus is not optional," even though Peter does not currently understand that "it is an essential condition for becoming his friend" (SS 22). Interpreting this passage, Romand Coles claims that it constitutes a profound call to "enter into relationships that one can only understand later, after one has leaned into them with vulnerable receptivity – patiently and perhaps only after a long

---

<sup>102</sup> Romand Coles emphasizes this in his essay "Gentled into Being," in Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 208-228. I am indebted this essay throughout for my reading of Vanier.

time.”<sup>103</sup> Further to this, Vanier does not allow us to conceive of Jesus as the limitless, self-reliant hero either. Jesus, Vanier reminds us, received this servant love from two women – the weeping woman (Luke 7:36) and Mary of Bethany (John 12) – and “wanted to express his love for his disciples in the same way” (SS 23). Coles’s gloss is again illuminating: “Vanier’s Jesus...is born and dies...as a being whose ‘new life’ is formed in ongoing and entangled dependencies through which he opens (and calls us to open) to others.”<sup>104</sup>

Vanier further emphasizes the deeply corporeal nature of footwashing; it is partially because of the intimate touch of footwashing that Vanier claims that “friendship and relationship [are] contained in washing feet,” for such touch “communicates love” (SS 36-37). Vanier illustrates this by telling the story of Peter, a severely disabled man who came to the L’Arche community in La Forestiere (SS 36-37). Peter, Vanier tells us, was a difficult, delinquent, and hurting man who refused to cooperate or communicate with the community. After discovering that he had athlete’s foot, they, following doctor’s orders, began washing his feet three times a day. The difference this brought about, Vanier writes, was stark and immediate. “Peter began to open up. His whole attitude towards us changed” (SS 37). For the same reason that washing Peter’s feet regularly transformed him, footwashing is not simply a lesson about servanthood (or even a lesson about servanthood that includes the theme of receptivity); Jesus must wash the disciples’ feet if they are to be a part of him. Of course, for both Vanier and Jesus, the washing of the feet is a symbolic act; but as Vanier rightly points out, “Jesus insists on the

---

<sup>103</sup> Coles, “Gentled into Being,” 220.

<sup>104</sup> Coles, “Gentled into Being,” 220-221.

importance of washing, of touching each other's feet" (SS 25). There is a reason that touch is such a common metaphor for making a meaningful impact on someone: communion takes place in the material interaction of our limited bodies. Vanier is suggesting that it is in the mingling of finite bodies that one person gives of her particular being, with particular and peculiar weaknesses fully on display, and also allows herself to be moved and challenged by the particular being of the other.

The importance of weakness permeates Vanier's writing about communion. Interdependence means a willingness to let go of oneself in order to receive the other and to vulnerably offer and expose oneself to the other. And hence, communion is itself an embodiment and embrace of weakness; it is loving others enough to let them "reach us and becoming sensitive enough to reach them" (CG 48). Vanier points out that Peter (Jesus's disciple), for example, will be called to build Jesus's new society of love; but to do so he will have to be vulnerable, giving "up certain ideas and even holy customs and traditions that gave him security" (SS 74). From beginning to end, communion entails tremendous risk. Vanier frequently details how revealing and encountering the hopes, desires, limits, vulnerabilities, and needs of ourselves and others can lead to anguish and tensions, when needs and expectations are not met (e.g., CG 118-130). At the same time, Vanier maintains that communion is what leads us to joy and celebration, to fully experience being human under God's grace with others. This weakness, then, is also a strength; Vanier argues that "the cement of unity is interdependence" (CG 48). Likewise, "tensions bring people back to the reality of their helplessness; obliging them to spend more time in prayer and dialogue, to work patiently to overcome the crisis and refind lost

unity” (CG 120). In again revealing to us our own poverty and limits, we encounter a new opportunity to grow in new dependencies to God and others, such that tension and difficulty “can signal the approach of a new grace of God” (CG 121).

A major aspect of Vanier’s writing on weakness is the privileged place he believes the poor, the outcast, and the weak (in his case this is usually people with intellectual handicaps) must occupy in communities that are truly a sign and embodiment of God’s loving communion (e.g., SS 64). Vanier emphasizes Jesus’s strangeness and vulnerability in the footwashing position as a way of emphasizing the privileged place that outsiders and the weak should have in interdependent communities. In his yearning for communion and his vulnerable offering of himself, Jesus “reveals to us a God hidden in littleness” (SS 30). It is this open yearning for communion, the exposure of their need, that make the poor and weak so important in Vanier’s eyes. In their pain, “the poor cry out for love and communion. That is why they are so close to God. They cry out for God, since God is love and communion” (SS 63). They thus “awaken people’s hearts,” calling us all to greater love and inter-dependence (SS 63).

### **Considering Weil through the Lens of Communion**

Vanier therefore emphasizes our finitude, our corporeality, and the extent to which our being is bound up with particular others as conditions for, rather than impediments to, our ability to show love and compassion. While he is wary of the various ways that we can become involved in human attachments for the sake of dominating others, person-to-person relationships remain the primary way that he envisions love for

others and the fulfillment of the self. A significant reason for this is that for him the true weakness of love is that which receives from and shares with another. Anything that hides or blocks or disappears the self, and all its wounds, limits, and weakness, constitutes a deceptive maneuvering for power. Another reason is that Vanier's deep commitment to even the most desperately dependent people with intellectual disabilities means that he simply cannot understand the human self outside of inter-dependent relationships. An autonomous self is for him neither a desirable or possible goal, and to try to cut ourselves off from others is to do violence to both them and us. The question then, turning to Weil, is whether and how her work, when brought face to face with such an articulation of communion (a term that I cannot find in her writing), is able to answer to Vanier's own rigorous account of love's weakness.

We have already seen how Weil attends to one of the most obvious differences between her and Vanier, namely, the passive state of nothingness Weil believes the self must become if it is to love and the rather glaring discrepancy between this state and the personal love she instructs us to direct to others. Weil sought to resolve this problem by emphasizing the absolute importance of our consent to our own de-creation, a consent that she thinks we can encourage by providing places of human warmth and fraternity. With Vanier in the background, we can begin to see some potential difficulties with Weil's solutions. Weil's suggestion that the more we experience the joys and well-being of being a part of a rooted community of exchange, the more likely we are to renounce all these things in favour of a rootless and impersonal existence void of consciousness may already seem a bit strange. But with Vanier we can see how this set-up risks severing our

humanity from our calling, and, along the same lines, the good of the divine or supernatural from the earthly or natural, putting them into competition with each other. For Vanier, Jesus's divinity lies in his perfect humanity and the means and end of our salvation are in continuity with each other: perfect communion.

Similarly, there is the question of what consent refers to: who or what is it that continually consents to the transformation into inert matter? To consent, this thing must be autonomous of all ties and influence, in complete command of itself, and have the ability to give itself over into nothingness. From the perspective of the tangled interdependencies Vanier gives voice to, this consenting being appears as a being of power and strength that will not be able to give itself to particular others. Weil, as we have seen, does argue for the importance of the individual's absolute autonomy; what I am pointing out is that centring on the individual's autonomous consent as the only way to undo our autonomy makes it unclear how our autonomy is ultimately ever undone (unless it is done to an unwilling agent from outside, as Weil does not want to happen).

This closely relates to another theme wherein Vanier might doubt the genuineness of Weil's weakness: risk. For Vanier, the very real risk of our vulnerability is the very essence of our weakness. We expose and open ourselves to others; we come to trust and rely on them and they can (and do) hurt us and let us down. Weil, meanwhile, argues that when we reach the illimitable by becoming nothing/everything, we put ourselves permanently out of harm's way. The dead cannot be killed; nothing/everything cannot be diminished; those who, in Weil's explicitly Stoic argumentation, have no attachments, even to themselves, cannot feel any loss (e.g., GG 194). The question then is whether



such an invulnerable (non) self can either give or receive to others, for it must do so without being vulnerable to others.

Weil would likely counter that our lack of vulnerability in perfect love stems not from our isolation from but from our absolute openness to them. However, even if we let lie the fact that the thing that consents to this openness does not seem to be adequately accounted for, Vanier's understanding of communion still poses a number of tricky questions for Weil. What I have tried to emphasize in Vanier is the extent to which a receptive and generous love is necessarily bound up with particularity and dependency – both our own and others'. If, in transporting myself wholly to the place of and disappearing into the other, I cease to be present, then the other person ceases to have somebody to give to. Likewise, in emptying myself of all form and content when I give myself to the other, I deprive him or her not only of the gift of myself but decline to offer an invitation to communion. To be sure, Weil frequently stresses the importance of learning from others and outsiders and is clear that compassion must be attentive to particular needs, but because the receptivity that she demands is without limits, the otherness that she often ends up with is a generalized one. It thereby holds the danger of erasing precisely the kind of particular differences that are necessary for the kinds of dependent relationships that Vanier so compellingly articulates.<sup>105</sup> That is, sheer otherness is undifferentiated because it cannot be attentive to particular needs and wants. We might put the point to Weil in terms of the question of whether she is able to have her feet washed. Particularly given her comments on the fact that we despoil others if ever we

---

<sup>105</sup> We might here consider the abstraction of *choosing* factory work and of *choosing* war rations. See Leslie Fielder, "Introduction," in *WG*, xix.

touch them, I suspect that the answer to this question is no; and thus, in its refusal of all dependency, an absolute openness to others ends up not as the truthful apprehension of them, but in a (secure) closing off of ourselves, such that we lose the other.

Perhaps the central issue or problem is Weil's inability to think of love in any other terms but an absolute binary between presence and absence, such that to be wholly present and receptive to the other I must be wholly absent to myself. In this schema, the self is only ever an obstacle of force to others that I must remove if I am to allow others to grow; and, indeed, Weil often writes about the work of love being one of eradicating our creatureliness (see, e.g., N 423).<sup>106</sup> Hence, Weil's understanding of love is primarily, perhaps even exclusively, one of restraint, self-diminution, and self-sacrifice. It seems, then, that despite her illuminating efforts to escape the realm of what I have called territorial relations, Weil remains trapped within a territorial conception, in which my contraction coincides with the other's expansion and vice versa. Stuck within this binary, a renunciation of one's autonomy ends up reiterating this autonomy, and an absolute

---

<sup>106</sup> Sympathetic readers of Weil almost routinely downplay, deny, or paper over this aspect of Weil's writings. J. P. Little writes that "for Simone Weil decreation was in some respects only the recognition of the actual status of the created being" ("Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation," 26). Diogenes Allen argues that Weil does not speak of our annihilation, but "the acceptance of ourselves as God's creatures" ("The Concept of Reading," 112). These claims, as such, are not cited and do not engage with Weil's own statements that our presence is only ever pollution and that love on our part is only ever withdrawal (N 126, 193, 348, 364, 401, 423); that creation is nothingness, misery, and sin (N 262, 268; FLN 218); that to accept our creaturehood is our greatest crime (FLN 211). Martin Andic's attempts to sanitize Weil are particularly galling. He asserts that what Weil is talking about in these sorts passages is "not absence of being, but another kind of being" and that for Simone Weil "renouncing everything that we finitely were and will be in the imaginations of others and ourselves is becoming nothing but creatures who an mediate between God and one another" (Martin Andic, "Discernment and the Imagination," in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*, 128 and 132). He provides numerous citations but few actual quotations and performs no textual interpretation. This especially matters because the pages he cites in regard to these points do not usually back up the precise claims he makes and at times contradict his claims. For example, Andic cites N 126 to back up his claim that we renounce finitude in order to embrace being creatures under God. I do not see such a claim on this page, but Weil does, in seeming contradiction to Andic, state: "I am all. But this particular 'I' is God – And it is not an 'I'.... I am absent from everything which is true, or beautiful, or good" (126).

embrace of the other ends up losing the other in the void one has made of oneself.

Vanier's presentation of communion, on the other hand, disrupts this logic of territory, positing a vision of interdependency in which people can together grow in the weakness of love.

Bibliography

- Allen, Diogenes. "The Concept of reading and the Book of Nature." In *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Andic, Martin. "Discernment and the Imagination." In *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Bell, Richard H. "Introduction: Divine Humanity: Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture." In *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993
- . "Reading Simone Weil on Rights, Justice, and Love." In *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Cayley, David. "Enlightened by Love: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil," podcast audio (5 hours). Broadcast August 2002. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.davidcayley.com/podcasts?category=Simone+Weil>.
- Coles, Romand. "Gentled into Being." In Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles. *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*. Eugene: Cascade, 2008.
- Coulter, Philip. "How to do Ordinary Things" (two parts). *Ideas*, hosted by Paul Kennedy. CBC Radio One. Broadcast September 2 & September 9, 2014. Available online at <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-to-do-ordinary-things-part-1-1.2914058> & <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-to-do-ordinary-things-part-2-1.2760718>.
- Dodaro, Robert. "Eloquent Lies, Just Wars and the Politics of Persuasion: Reading Augustine's *City of God* in a 'Postmodern' World." *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994).
- Doering, Jane and Eric Springsted, ed. *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.
- Fielder, Leslie. "Introduction." In Simone Weil. *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Crauford. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.
- Finch, Henry L. *Simone Weil and the Intellect of Grace*, ed. Martin Andic. New York:

Continuum, 2001.

Grant, George. *Collected Works of George Grant, Vol. 4: 1970-1988*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.

Hauerwas, Stanley and Jean Vanier. *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2008.

Johnson, Kelly. *The Fear of Beggars: Stewardship and Poverty in Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007.

Little, J. P. "Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation," in *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Meyers, Ched and Eric DeBode. "Towering Trees and 'Talented Slaves.'" *The Other Side*, 35, no. 3 (1999).

Neufeld, Thomas Y. *Recovering Jesus: The Witness of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007.

Petrement, Simone. *Simone Weil: A Life*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Pantheon, 1976.

Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols., trans. Scott Moncrieff et. al. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.

Rozelle-Stone, Rebecca and Lucian Stone. *Simone Weil and Theology*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013.

Springsted, Eric. "Rootedness: Culture and Value." In *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture: Readings toward a Divine Humanity*, ed. Richard Bell. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

- . *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love*. Cambridge: Cowley, 1986.

Taylor, Charles. "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments." In *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Thibon, Gustave. *L'Ignorance Étoillée*. Paris: Fayard, 1984.

Vanier, Jean. *Becoming Human*. Toronto: Anansi, 1998.

- . *Befriending the Stranger*. New York: Paulist Press, 2005.
- . *Community and Growth*, revised edition. New York: Paulist Press, 1989.
- . *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*. Ottawa: Novalis, 2004.
- . *The Scandal of Service: Jesus Washes Our Feet*. Toronto: Novalis, 1996.

Weil, Simone. “Are We Struggling for Justice?,” trans. Marina Barabas. *Philosophical Investigations*, 53/1 (1987). Translation of “Lutton-nous pour la justice?” in *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.

- . “Essay on the Notion of Reading,” trans. Rebecca Fine Rose and Timothy Tessin. *Philosophical Investigations*, 13/4 (1990). Translation of “Essai sur la notion de lecture.” *Études Philosophiques*, 1 (1946).
- . *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970. Translation of parts of *Cahiers*, 3 volumes. Paris: Plon, 1970-1974.
- . *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Translation of *La Pesanteur et la grace*. Paris: Plon, 2002.
- . *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*. Translated by Elisabeth Geissbuhler. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987. Translation of parts of *La source grecque*. Paris: Gallimard, 1953. And *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes*. Paris: La Colombe, 1951.
- . *Letter to a Priest*. Toronto: Penguin, 2003.
- . *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, 2 volumes, trans. Arthur Wills. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956. Translation of parts of *Cahiers*, 3 volumes. Paris: Plon, 1970-1974.
- . *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- . *On the Abolition of all Political Parties*, trans. Simon Leys. New York: New York Review of Books, 2013. Translation of *Note sur la suppression générale des partis politiques*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.

- *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1973. Translation of *Oppression and liberté* . Paris. Gallimard, 1955.
- *Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- . “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” in Simone Weil and Rachel Bepaloff, *War and the Iliad*, trans. Mary McCarthy. New York: New York Review of Books, 2005. “Translation of L’Iliade ou le poeme de la force.” *Les Cahiers du Sud* 16 (1940).
- *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002. Translation from *L’Enracinement: Prélude à une Déclaration des Devoirs Envers l’être humain*. Paris: Gallimard, 1949.
- *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Crauford. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Translation from *Attente de Dieu*. Paris: La Colombe, 1963.

Williams, Rowan. “Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-existence of God.” In *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton. Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2007.

Winch, Peter. *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.