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The Power to Say I. Reflections on the Modernity of Simone Weil's Mystical Thought

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Abstract

What precisely is at stake in Simone Weil's shift to Christianity? Is it only the story of a modern agnostic intellectual discovering and reinventing an old religious tradition? What if, under the surface of that move, modernity itself is as much at stake? What if Weil's mystical thought conceals a profound reflection on the modern subject? It is true, in line with almost the entire pre-modern and modern mystical tradition, her thought is a full-blown attack against the Cartesian ego and its pretention to be the solid and free basis of our modern relation to reality. But what if the most interesting aspect of Weil's thought is that she *fails* in that attack, and that, despite all her efforts to destroy that subject, that very subject resists even in the very heart of both the mystical truth she describes and in her theoretical thought about that truth. What if Weil's move to Christianity does not say so much about Christianity, nor about the Christian side of modernity, but about the abysmal base of modernity's subject?

Keywords

Simone Weil – modernity – mysticism – Descartes – Christianity

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... il n'y aurait pas assez de *je* en nous pour
aimer, pour abandonner le *je* par amour.¹

¹ Weil 2002b, p. 86.



Simone Weil's mysticism does not fit very well in the subject of this volume. The intellectual atmosphere she lived in can be considered as being already the result of the shift to religion that occurred around 1900. And neither is 'experience' a central concept in her oeuvre, nor is it the base of her turn to religion.² Yet, considered from a broader perspective, Weil does fit in the volume's subject in that her oeuvre illustrates the rediscovery of modernity coinciding with the rediscovery of Christian faith. For this is what happened around 1900: authors combined their understanding of what it means to be modern with a conversion to Christianity. Even the artistic avant-garde scene of that time, Dada, illustrates this. At the very instance Hugo Ball launched Dada as the most modernist kind of art ever, he realised he was in fact almost performing a Christian liturgy.³ Something similar can be said about Simone Weil. A high-levelled trained philosopher, who had worked on the founding father of modernity, Descartes,⁴ who had engaged herself in both modern avant-garde science⁵ and avant-garde politics,⁶ discovered Christianity and became posthumously one of the major authors that supported the legacy of the 1900 shift to religion and contributed to the influence of that shift till today.

What is at stake in Simone Weil's shift? Is it only her move to Christianity? Is it only the story of a modern agnostic intellectual who discovers and reinvents the old religious tradition? What if, under the surface of that move, modernity itself is as much at stake? What if Weil's mystical thought conceals a profound reflection on the modern subject? It is true, in line with almost the entire pre-modern and modern mystical tradition, her thought is a full-blown attack against the Cartesian ego and its pretention to be the solid and free basis of our modern relation to reality. And yet, what if the most interesting aspect of Weil's thought is that she *fails* in that attack, and that, despite all her efforts to destroy that subject, that very subject resists even in the very heart

2 See for instance: *Sur la science*, where she writes that she appreciates mystical experiences all the more when the mystic does not write about it (Weil 1966, p. 146).

3 Ball 1996, pp. 70 et seq.

4 "Science et perception chez Descartes", écrit comme "thèse de diplôme d'études supérieures" (for the École Normale Supérieure; 1929–1930); Weil 1966, pp. 9–69. For a general interpretation of her thoughts on science, see for instance Morgan 2005.

5 She even wrote an essay on quantum mechanics: "Réflexions à propos de la théorie des quanta"; Weil 1966, pp. 130–146.

6 She was engaged in the French communist and other labour movements and went to Barcelona in 1936 in order to support the republicans in their fight against Franco's fascism. For a general view on her political engagements, see Moulakis 1998.

of both the mystical truth she describes and in her theoretical thought about that truth. What if Weil's move to Christianity does not say so much about Christianity, nor about the Christian side of modernity, but about the abysmal base of modernity's subject?

In what follows, I focus on Weil's first posthumous publication, *Gravity and Grace*, the anthology of her reflections written down in the notebooks that she left in France when, in 1942, she left for America in order – being racially Jewish – to escape Nazi Europe. I will start with a reading of some of her notes on the 'I' – "*le moi*" – in *Gravity and Grace*. Some headlines of her general theory must be understood in order to comprehend the paradoxes that characterize the 'I' in her mystical thought. Only then, it will be possible to understand the critical potential of her oeuvre with respect to modernity and its problematic subject.

1 Nothing but the I

Modernity can be defined as the age of the I. From the seventeenth century onwards, the point on the base of which we relate to the world is no longer supposed to be situated in the outside world, but in ourselves. The modern self-understanding broke with the medieval way in which man understood himself. The latter, indeed, related to the world on the base of that world itself or, more exactly, on the base of the One that gave the world its base, God. And since God was supposed to be the base of ourselves as human beings as well, our relation to the world – as for instance practiced in science – had a solid ground. We and the world shared a common ground. What is often called the 'death of God' is nothing but the break of that common base. After a century and a half of religious wars, men could no longer relate to the world on the base of that common supposition which was God. In other terms: God ceased to be the 'subject' – i.e. the supposition or base posited underneath both reality and ourselves.⁷

René Descartes was the first to philosophically formulate the newly emerging subject, which turned out to be man himself. Everything might lack ground, and yet, the one who thinks so, cannot be without having a ground for that very thinking (doubting), and that ground can be nowhere else than in himself. Man's thinking ego, disconnected from any other being, was 'discovered' to be the ground or 'substance' – the subject – on the base of which we relate to reality. This is *modern* freedom: we suppose ourselves to be free *from* the

⁷ Koyré 1957; see also De Kesel 2009, pp. 59 et seq.

world, *disconnected* from it; and that, on that free base, we relate to the world as a infinite set of ‘objects’, as the ‘res extensa’ (Descartes), as the ‘mechanical’ universe, the world of modern Newtonian physics. Everything has become ‘objective’, except us, i.e. the ‘things’ thinking this. God, too, has become ‘object’. Functioning as ‘subject’ in the Middle Ages, at the dawn of Modernity God changed position and became object. Object of doubt and object of faith. The *subject* of faith as well as of science or of any other relation to reality is henceforth man himself. The ego, the I: this is the subject, i.e. the ‘first certainty’, the solid ground upon which man’s relation to reality is based.⁸

Weil’s thought, as expressed for instance in the notes gathered in *Gravity and Grace*, put forward a world which, at first sight, is not quite modern in the sense as outlined here. Weil’s world is dominated by ‘gravity’ or, which amounts to the same thing, by ‘necessity’, i.e. by laws independent from any human influence and to which humans are profoundly subjected.⁹ If there is a kind of freedom with regard to the dominance of ‘gravity’ and ‘necessity’, it is located, not in the human subject, but in God and his ‘Grace’ – both being mainly present by means of radical absence. This is the paradox that is central in *Gravity and Grace* as well as in the entire writings of Simone Weil: though seemingly its antipode, the necessity that rules the world *is* its freedom. The ruling necessity *is* a gift of Grace. Once one is open to Grace, one lives necessity as given by Grace. So, if Weil discovers traces of Grace and God in our world, it is only as persistent absences. Moreover, as will be explained further on, her desire for God will therefore coincide with a desire to disappear – more exactly: to disappear as desiring I, as longing subject, as ego.

And yet, the ego, in its modern shape, is not simply absent in Weil’s thought. In *Gravity and Grace*, and certainly in the chapter entitled ‘Le moi’ (‘The Self’), the reader can easily discover clear traces of Cartesian modernity. Despite her intention to ascribe the totality of all that is to God, she clearly states that this does not go for the human subject, for man’s “power to say ‘I’”.

We possess nothing in the world – a mere chance can strip us of everything – except the power to say ‘I’. That is what we have to give to God – in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish – only the destruction of the ‘I’.¹⁰

8 Descartes 1984, p. 16.

9 See the first chapter of *Gravity and Grace* in English: Weil 2002a, pp. 1–4; and in French: Weil 1947, pp. 1–5.

10 Weil 2002a, p. 26; see Weil 1947, p. 29. For the note as edited in the *Oeuvres complètes*, see: Weil 1997, p. 461. For a comment, see for instance Vetö 2014, p. 35.

We are right in the middle of a typically Weilian reflection on the ‘divine’ core of the human condition – a reflection that is known for the radicalism by which God is put in the first place, since, to her, He is in fact the only reality of all that is. God is everything and, therefore, the owner of all that is, so she believes. And yet, there is something that escapes God’s ownership: the human “power to say ‘I’”. That power and the I that are at stake in this saying are not God’s property. So, if there is anything man can give to God that is not already God’s own property, it is his I. In this case, however, to *give* means to *destroy*. Only by doing so can God be acknowledged as owner of everything. Whatever that may mean, it is clear that the power to say ‘I’ is only man’s property.

Can we not recognize a ‘Cartesian’ movement underlying Weil’s thought here? It is true, Weil’s movement seems to go in a direction opposite to Descartes’ argument: it does not lead to the sovereignty of the human ego, but to the one of God. God, being the sovereign of all that is, cannot avoid that the I has sovereign power over itself. At least it can *say* it has; at least that saying is beyond God’s almighty power. In that sense, one can state that Weil’s thought puts the human subject in a Cartesian position, in principle escaping God’s power. “Nothing in the world can rob us of the power to say ‘I.’” Really? Is that power so strong, so sovereign? Another note on the same page in *Gravity and Grace* nonetheless mentions an exception:

Nothing in the world can rob us of the power to say ‘I.’¹¹ Nothing except extreme affliction. Nothing is worse than extreme affliction which destroys the ‘I’ from outside, because after that we can no longer destroy it ourselves. What happens to those whose ‘I’ has been destroyed from outside by affliction? It is not possible to imagine anything for them but annihilation according to the atheistic or materialistic conception.

Though they may have lost their ‘I’, it does not mean that they have no more egoism. Quite the reverse. To be sure, this may occasionally happen when a dog-like devotion is brought about, but at other times the being is reduced to naked, vegetative egoism. An egoism without an ‘I’.¹²

11 Thibon, editor of *Gravity and Grace*, has intervened in Weil’s text here and dropped a part of the sentence. In the French edition of the *Cahiers* we read: “Destruction du *je*. Nous ne possédons rien au monde sinon le pouvoir de dire je, parce que toute autre chose au monde, même notre caractère, notre intelligence, nos amours et nos haines, peut nous être enlevé par la fortune, mais non le pouvoir de dire je.” Weil 1997, p. 461.

12 Weil 2002a, pp. 26 et seq.; see Weil 1947, p. 29; and for the original text: Weil 1997, p. 461.

The 'I' is not so strong and sovereign that it cannot be overthrown 'from outside'. The 'I', i.e. the possibility of resistance by a power to say 'I', can be annihilated by an "atheistic and materialistic conception". What Weil has in mind is modern science denying the existence of a proper 'I' or 'subject', supposing that all functions commonly ascribed to it can be reduced to bodily reactions. In addition, worse than materialistic sciences as such, is the way they are applied in the social and political domain and, in that capacity, are able to support the cruelties of totalitarian regimes. A human being can be truly reduced to "dog-like devotion", unable to the slightest shape of resistance. It is not to say that such a victim of totalitarianism has no ego and, consequently, no egoism at all. Its ego and egoism are reduced to a vegetative level, to an 'egoism without ego', to a mere reflex of survival. Resistance is definitely out of scope here.

Moreover, so is the capacity to give up any resistance voluntarily and freely. For this is what Weil's argument is about here. She is looking for something we, as humans, can give to God that is not beforehand owned by Him. As we know already, there is only one thing eligible for that: our "power to say 'I'". In another note on the same first page of the chapter "The Self" (*Le moi*) in *Gravity and Grace*, situated between the two notes already cited, we read: "Offering: We cannot offer anything but the 'I', and all we call an offering is merely a label attached to a compensatory assertion of the 'I'."¹³ The I is the only thing we can offer to God. As we already know, here, offering equals destroying. The I must be destroyed for God's sake. However, it is not the destruction as such that counts, but the fact that it is I who destroys the I that I am. This is why I have to prevent my I from being destroyed 'from outside'. It must be destroyed 'from within'. The I must be destroyed by the I: this is what God deserves, what is at the level of his sovereignty. The note cited before the last one, ends as follows:

So long as we ourselves have begun the process of destroying the 'I', we can prevent any affliction from causing harm. For the 'I' is not destroyed by external pressure without a violent revolt. If for the love of God we refuse to give ourselves over to this revolt, the destruction does not take place from outside but from within.¹⁴

What a strange situation the 'I' is in! It must protect itself from being destroyed "from outside". For what purpose? To be able to destroy itself "from within". What is the purpose of that self-destruction? To protect us against the harm threatening it. Or, as Weil writes: "to prevent any affliction from causing harm".

¹³ Weil 2002a, p. 26; see Weil 1947, p. 29; Weil 1997, pp. 461 et seq.

¹⁴ Weil 2002a, p. 27; see Weil 1947, p. 30; Weil 1997, p. 461.

Here we face a central knot in the paradoxical texture of Weil's thought that in fact requires an extensive explanation of her entire 'system' (or, as some say, 'lack of system'). Though time and space lack here to develop the entire philosophical and theological theory that is behind Weil's notes, some headlines can briefly be clarified.

2 Religion for Slaves

Simone Weil had lived herself situations in which the 'I' was on the verge of being destroyed "from outside". In a letter to Father Perrin (included in *Waiting for God* under the title "Spiritual Autobiography"), she describes such an experience. She refers to the period¹⁵ when she had left the comfort of her teaching position at the *Lycée* of Roanne in order to share the life of factory workers in the industry. That experience of "affliction", so she declares, is one of the three "contacts with Catholicism that really counted".¹⁶ Confronted with the sufferings caused by the industrial labor condition, she writes:

That contact with affliction [douleur] had killed my youth. Until then I had not had any experience of affliction [...]. I knew quite well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world, I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. 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, like the branding of the red-hot iron the Romans put on the foreheads of their most despised slaves. Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave.¹⁷

She does not write that her 'I' really was destroyed, but the risk that such could happen was definitely there. What is more, in Weil's view, this risk is always there. It hallmarks our human condition. That is why experiences of

15 "[...] some months of labor in a factory, between December 1934 and August 1935", so Florence de Lussy writes, adding in a footnote: "Some weeks, should we say, if one does not count [...] the sick leaves"; Weil 1999, p. 21 [Translation MDK].

16 Weil 1951 p. 66; see Weil 2016, p. 51.

17 Weil 1951, pp. 66 et seq.; see Weil 2016, p. 52.

“affliction” do not incite her to avoid them or to look for ‘non-afflicted’ situations. According to Weil, we are *always* in an afflicted condition. Why? Because we live under the regime of ‘necessity’, of ‘gravity’. That is what she means when she declares herself to be a slave, and slavery to be our common condition. In another text in *Waiting for God*, entitled “The Love of God and Affliction”, she writes:

As for us, we are nailed down to the spot, only free to choose which way we look [*libres seulement de nos regards*], ruled by necessity. A blind mechanism, heedless of degrees of spiritual perfection, continually tosses men [...]. If the mechanism were not blind, there would not be any affliction. Affliction is anonymous before all things; it deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things. It is indifferent; and it is the coldness of this indifference – a metallic coldness – that freezes all those it touches right to the depths of their souls. They will never find warmth again. They will never believe any more that they are anyone.¹⁸

The note is on affliction in general, but she talks about herself as well: about her terrible headaches for instance that never left her and got worse the older she became. Moreover, she talks about the outside world full of affliction: about the society under the pressure of social conflicts and wars that ‘afflicts’ our culture in crisis. There is a blind and fatal necessity in all of this. As such, we cannot really change it, since even our actions against it are ruled by the very necessity they are fighting. If there is freedom in all this, it is the freedom “to choose which way we look”. We are “*libres seulement de nos regards*”. This “*regard*”, this “gaze” is the only means by which, in the realm of ‘gravity’, one can experience ‘grace’.

That ‘gaze’ is the base of Weil’s Christianity. It is, however, not what made her convert to that religion. What she discovered in Christianity is rather the conversion that is in that gaze itself. The gaze itself has a capacity to produce a change, not in what it looks at, but in the act of looking itself.¹⁹ It is what hap-

18 Weil 1951, pp. 124 et seq.; see Weil 2016, pp. 115 et seq.

19 While the “gaze” does not change the outside world, it has not to change man’s inner life either. See for instance the following note: “Il ne faut pas essayer de changer en soi ou d’effacer désirs et aversions, plaisirs et douleurs. Il faut les subir passivement comme les sensations de couleurs et sans leur accorder plus de crédit. [...] Accepter ainsi et non autrement les désirs et aversions, plaisirs et douleurs de toute espèce qui se produisent en moi. Tout vient de Dieu en tant que cela vient de la nécessité tout à fait aveugle; et non autrement. (Est-ce là ce qu’entendait Spinoza par le salut de la connaissance?)” Weil 2002b, pp. 110 et seq.

pened in the gaze of the *amor fati*, as practiced by antique stoic philosophers as well as by Weil herself before her explicit turn to Christianity. Confronted with a world that goes its own way, ruled by laws of strict necessity and showing radical indifference with regard to our individual aspirations and sufferings, we must realize we are excluded from it – so Weil argues. Whatever we think, feel or want, none of our acts will have impact whatsoever on the world that continues its way in radical indifference, in metallically cold necessity. Yet our gaze upon the world still has the capacity to protest against that “metallic coldness” and, since this is senseless, to approve and to love it. With iron certainty, we are able to acknowledge that. There is absolutely no place in this world for us as independent and free persons, except by fully accepting and loving it.

3 Redemptive Suffering

Weil has lived her life that way. It is what, as a student of Alain, she already adored in Homer's *Iliad*;²⁰ it is what she learned from Greek stoicism; and it is what she discovered in Christianity. She did not so much convert to Christianity; she rather discovered the *conversional* power of the human gaze as practiced in Christian religion. This is how we should read the well-known passage in *Waiting for God* that describes the “second” of her “important contacts” with Catholicism. It reports an experience during the Portuguese journey she made with her parents a few weeks after the terrible time she had as a worker at the assembly line in the Renault factory near Paris.

In this state of mind then, and in a wretched condition physically, I entered the little Portuguese village, which, alas, was very wretched too, on the very day of the festival of its patron saint. I was alone. It was the evening and there was a full moon over the sea. The wives of the fishermen were, in procession, making a tour of all the ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness. Nothing can give any idea of it. I have never heard anything so poignant unless it were the song of the boatmen on the Volga. There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.²¹

20 Weil 2014, pp. 71–115. See also Gold 2016.

21 Weil 1951, p. 67; see Weil 2016, pp. 52 et seq.

Weil's Christianity is not that of salvation, of delivering the "slaves" we are from the chains of pain, sin, and finitude. According to her, we are and will forever remain slaves and, in that sense, we will never stop living our lives full of affliction under the 'gravity' laws of necessity. Of course, we are looking for what is opposite to it, for grace, freedom and light. This, too, is our condition. It is so in an even more basic way, for it is the desire for grace, freedom and light that keeps us alive. In essence, our life is to be defined as a desire for God. This is what Christianity teaches and why it is a religion "slaves" need. Subjected to the afflicted condition of gravity and necessity, they need an orientation towards grace and light, i.e. towards God. Yet, Weil argues, God is to be found not *beyond* the pains of affliction, but *through* – and even *in* – them. We are slaves, and only through – and in – the affliction of our slavery we can find God. So we read in the third of the "three important contacts with Catholicism" she sums up in her "Spiritual Autobiography":

In 1938, I spent ten days at Solesmes, from Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday, following all the liturgical services. I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.²²

During her mystical experience in Solesmes, Christ's passion "entered" into Weil's "being". And *only* his passion. If, according to Weil, there is something redemptive in Christ, it is not the fact that he redeemed us from suffering and evil: it is suffering itself, evil itself, which is redemptive.²³

Christ suffered, not simply from being tortured to death, but also from being abandoned by God. "Why have thou forsaken me": again and again that phrase reappears in Weil's notebooks.²⁴ What Weil admires in Christ is that, in this most God-forsaken moment ever that was his dying on the cross, there was

²² Weil 1951, p. 68; see Weil 2016, p. 53.

²³ "L'extrême grandeur du christianisme vient de ce qu'il ne cherche pas un remède contre la souffrance, mais un usage surnaturel de la souffrance." Weil 2002b, p. 64.

²⁴ See, for instance: "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me? There we have the real proof that Christianity is something divine." Weil 2002a, p. 87; see Weil 1947, p. 102.

absolutely no consolation. This is why she, a slave like anyone else, loves Christ: his divine suffering is without the slightest consolation, and to us, mortals in misery, it suffering does not give any consolation either. Christ does not deliver us from suffering. He rather shows us what it means that suffering itself delivers, renders free. Free from what? Not from suffering as such, but from its subject, from the 'I' that suffers. This is at least the case with the one who has reached the level of spiritual perfection and who has succeeded in destroying one's I 'from within'. Such a 'destroyed' I lives the suffering it bears as redemptive. Christ suffers, suffers from affliction, suffers from the absence of console. He suffers from Gods absence. And yet, he can bear that unbearable suffering because he has destroyed its 'bearer', its subject.

His 'I' is not destroyed 'from outside', but 'from within'. It is in that sense – and solely in that sense – that, according to Weil, his suffering is redemptive. The fourth reflection that follows the first three that I have quoted from the chapter "The Self" in *Gravity and Grace*, starts as follows:

Redemptive suffering. If a human being who is in a state of perfection and has through grace completely destroyed the 'I' in himself, falls into that degree of affliction which corresponds for him to the destruction of the 'I' from outside – we have there the cross in its fullness. Affliction can no longer destroy the 'I' in him for the 'I' in him no longer exists, having completely disappeared and left the place to God. But affliction produces an effect which is equivalent, on the plane of perfection, to the exterior destruction of the 'I'. It produces the absence of God. 'My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?'²⁵

What is left when, in a state of affliction, the I is destroyed 'from within'? Nothing but affliction – affliction similar also to the one caused by a destruction of the I 'from outside', affliction in the broad sense of the word, which according to Weil includes also evil. What is left after having destroyed the I and reached perfection, is a universe of pain and evil – a universe where God is terribly absent. A few lines further, we read:

Redemptive suffering is that by which evil really has fullness of being to the utmost extent of its capacity. By redemptive suffering, God is present in extreme evil. For the absence of God is the mode of divine presence

25 Weil 2002a, p. 27; see Weil 1947, p. 30.

which corresponds to evil – absence which is felt. He who has not God within himself cannot feel his absence.²⁶

The I is destroyed ‘from inside’, and what is left is a universe of pain and affliction, where God is completely absent and where that absence takes the shape of evil’s dominion. However, thus Weil, *this* is redemptive; it is the real way of God’s presence.²⁷

Weil’s thesis is as strong as strange: this is the least one can say. What does she try to say here? Why are suffering and (even) evil by themselves redemptive? Answer: because they bring me back to what I am, and this is nothing. Confronted with extreme suffering and facing evil that destroys me, since I am destroyed from within, I finally realize I am no longer that what is in between God and his creature. I realize that, become nothing, I have stopped disturbing that relation and soiling the perfect beauty of God’s creature. I see now that I am but ‘nothing’, but that this very nothingness allows God and his creature to be in direct mutual contact with one another. That idea is everywhere in Weil’s notes. In *Gravity and Grace*, it is especially present in the chapter “Self-Effacement”:

I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed, but the unwelcome third who is with two betrothed lovers and ought to go away so that they can really be together. If only I knew how to disappear there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear ... [...]

May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see.

[...]

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. To me it cannot tell its secret which is too high. If I go, then the creator and the creature will exchange their secrets. To see a landscape as it is when I am not there ... When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart.²⁸

26 Weil 2002a, p. 27; see Weil 1947, p. 30.

27 “Ce monde en tant que tout à fait vide de Dieu est Dieu lui-même. [...] C’est pourquoi toute consolation dans le malheur éloigne de l’amour et de la vérité.” Weil 2002b, p. 110.

28 Weil 2002a, pp. 41 et seq.; see Weil 1947, pp. 47 et seq. See also Weil 2002b, p. 60: “Que je disparaisse, afin que ces choses que je vois deviennent, du fait qu’elles ne seront plus choses que je vois, parfaitement belles.” See also: “Notre moi, disparaissant, doit devenir un trou à travers lequel Dieu et la création se regardent.”; see Weil 2006, p. 316.

Once the I is destroyed in a proper way (from within, not from outside), the relation between God and his creature is restored. Yet there is a question that cannot but be raised here: why does all this result in a universe that is as full of affliction and evil as before? Why does the universe of the I destroyed “from within” show no difference at all with the universe of the I destroyed ‘from outside’? In the answer lays Weil’s basic intuition. She locates the change that is at stake here neither in the outside world nor in God, but in the sole “gaze” (*regard*) with which the world and God are looked at. The change is solely in the self, in the ‘I’. Once my I is destroyed, I see that the world of necessity by which I suffer so much makes me only suffer because I tried to be someone in it. Now that I see I am nothing, I see that the world of necessity is in perfect relation with the divine source of grace, with God. I experience now that the world of necessity *is* the one of grace. I praise God for his creation, also for the hard, metallically cold laws it is ruled by, also for the blind fate of which I am the suffering victim. Yet Weil’s universe is not one of praise. For such, God remains too absent. He is only present in his absence. Just like redemption is not beyond suffering, but suffering itself. Why then suffering, pain, and affliction are in no way to overcome? Why does the solution for suffering require nothing else than suffering – except that now I accept it, and so keep it, and even support it?

4 “The irreducible basis of my suffering”

Here we face a paradox that Weil’s mystical thinking shares with all mystical thought. It is a paradox concerning the I as the ultimate obstacle the mystic meets on his way to God. God can only be reached if the I has been overcome, i.e. destroyed. How and who must destroy the I? Weil’s writings do not differ in this from the other writings of the mystical tradition: it is not ‘from outside’ that the I can be destroyed. Why? In that case, it would *really* be destroyed in the sense that there would be simply no one left to even start reaching for God. Weil stresses that the I must be destroyed ‘from within’. But who would do that job except the I? The I must empty itself, it must reduce itself to what it is, i.e. to nothing. Yet, that nothing must be an active one, it must be an agency. How can that agency of nothingness realize its nothingness? This is only possible thanks to – and within – a context of contrast. Only a context of affliction – affliction that is destructive for the I ‘from outside’ – can show an I that, ‘from within’, stands this affliction because of the I’s nothingness. A universe of pain is needed in order to allow the I to perform its nothingness.

The Weilian mystic would not be able to stand redemption from pain, affliction or evil, for then he *really* would lose the nothingness he is supposed to

be. His nothingness needs the contrasted context that *keeps on* saying to him that he is nothing. He exists by the grace of that saying, i.e. of the pain, affliction, and evil making clear to him that they don't take any account of him. Yet, precisely this allows him to acknowledge this nothingness. It is only than that he, in his quality of nothingness, can testify of what the alternative of pain and evil is, i.e. about the "light of salvation". In the chapter "The Cross", we read: "An innocent being who suffers sheds the light of salvation upon evil [repand sur le mal la lumière du salut]. Such a one is the visible image of the innocent God. That is why a God who loves man and a man who loves God have to suffer."²⁹ Suffering is needed, for salvation can only exist in the 'nothing' that resists it. That is why that nothing, in Weil's writing, can only exist in the act of performing itself as being destroyed by the world of necessity, affliction and evil, while that act, as a destruction 'from within', again and again reaffirms that 'irreducible I' that is at the base of that act.

In some notes, Weil says it almost in these words. For instance in a note of only one sentence: "This irreducible 'I' which is the irreducible basis of my suffering – I have to make this 'I' universal."³⁰ The I is nothing. That nothing can only be there in a context that attacks its false pretention to be something. It can only be there by the grace of an environment that afflicts it with "metallically cold" necessity. It does need affliction in order to perform that this affliction does not harm. It is the I's only way to show – and thus 'to be' – the nothingness it is. It is the only way to realize itself as nothing. Yet, this is precisely the way that 'self' is irreducible. The nothing that is the I uses the entire universe to posit itself as such. The irreducible I – which is nothing – uses the entire universe of affliction, pain and necessity in order to put itself as "irreducible". In the act of destroying itself, the I transfers its destructive force to the universe in order to let that universe destroy it. Why? To show that it is not the universe that destroys the I, but that it is the I that destroys itself, thus saving the universe, allowing it to regain in direct contact with its creator. It is the self-destroying I that is the "irreducible basis", not only of its own suffering, but of the entire world – a world of mere necessity that has to afflict the I precisely in order to enable it to perform itself as "irreducible".

As no other, Weil is a *modern* mystic – *modern* in the sense that she is fully aware of the 'death of God'. This means that God has ceased to be the 'subject', i.e. the 'ground' on the base of which we relate to reality. We no longer comprehend ourselves on the base of participating in God's creation. Instead, we relate to reality on a base which is nothing but ourselves. We consider ourselves to be

29 Weil 2002a, p. 91; see Weil 1947, p. 107.

30 Weil 2002a, p. 143; see Weil 1947, p. 163.

the 'subject' (base, ground) of our relation to the world, including to its creator, God. Yet, the fact that we are the subject of our relation to reality does not mean that we are the 'subject' of reality as such. We clearly know we are not God. The modern turn does not prevent a significant amount of modern people to believe that God keeps on being the subject / base / ground of reality. However, the subject of *that* belief is not with God but with the human, free 'self'.

Weil is definitely one of them. This is why, according to her, we must keep on looking for God in the reality we face. It is therefore obvious in her eyes that the real object of science is beauty, i.e. the order of reality as it rests in itself.³¹ In that sense, as she writes in one of her notes, "a science which does not bring us nearer to God is worthless".³²

For Weil, science must touch God or, what amounts to the same thing, the iron laws of necessity which, in their pureness, are grace itself. Science must touch the real subject, the subject of reality: God as reality's creator. Therefore, we must get beyond ourselves, beyond the false, modern idea of ourselves as subject. As Weil put it: the I must be destroyed 'from within'. Yet, if that destruction restores God in his original relation to reality, it might pretend to destroy the I, but that destruction itself requires a subject, a bearer of that act. Weil's intention to get beyond the modern subject (the subject / ground of our relation to reality) and to restore the pre-modern, real subject (the subject of reality itself, God) fails. In a way, she gets stuck in the act *as such* of destroying the (modern) subject, an act that never stops being executed and which inevitably requires a subject. That subject is a *modern* subject, a subject, not of reality, but of man's relation to reality. In the act of destruction the subject realizes that it coincides with an abyss. To embrace that abyss, to acknowledge the nothingness that separates reality from itself (i.e. from its creator): that is the aim of life, according to Weil. That aim, however, needs what it contradicts: if not the I, at least "the power to say I".

Biography

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31 "The object of science is the beautiful (that is to say order, proportion, harmony) in so far as it is suprasensible and necessary." Weil 2002a, p. 148 [translation modified, MDK]; see Weil 1947, p. 170.

32 Weil 2002a, p. 56; see Weil 1947, p. 64.

of monotheism, on the logic of gift-giving, on Holocaust reception, and on western mysticism. Recent books: *Zelfloos: de mystieke afgrond van het moderne Ik* [Self Loss: the Mystical Abyss of the Modern Ego] (Utrecht 2017) and *Het Münchhausenparadigm a: waarom Freud en Lacan ertoe doen* [The Münchhausen Paradigm: Why Freud and Lacan Matter] (Nijmegen, 2019).

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