

*Mystical Self, Activist Self:
Religion and Emancipation in the Thought of Simone Weil*

by

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The subject of this essay is the French mystic and political thinker Simone Weil and the fundamental philosophical importance in her work of a certain conception of how human beings ought to lead their lives. This conception I will call the mystical self for reasons soon to be made clear. The main point I want to make is that the novelty in Weil's use of the idea is that for her its realization in persons' lives is an indispensable condition for their attainment of political emancipation. To put the matter differently: throughout her career Simone Weil was vitally concerned with political emancipation, and over the course of her mature intellectual life she came to be centrally focused upon the importance for such emancipation of the religious idea of dying to the self. Such a role is the opposite of what the expression "mystical self" usually leads one to expect – that it is a self turned inward, rejecting the world and especially anything as worldly as politics. But this is not what Weil saw in the idea and that this is so is one of the reasons that her thought is so audacious and interesting.

Before going into how Weil links mysticism and political emancipation, a few words about Weil herself are in order.

Simone Weil was born in February 1909, in Paris, into an upper middle-class, largely assimilated, agnostic Jewish family, and indeed Weil declared herself to be an atheist at a precociously early age.¹ She was the younger sister of the distinguished mathematician,

¹ Eric O. Springsted, introduction to *Simone Weil: Writings Selected with an Introduction by Eric O. Springsted*, Modern Spiritual Masters Series, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 13; F. C. Ellert,

André Weil, who for many years was associated with the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey.² André was a child prodigy in mathematics, and reading between the lines of his sister's biographies André seems to have excelled at virtually everything he tried; Simone felt overshadowed by her brother's achievements, intellectual and otherwise, even though she too was extraordinarily gifted.³ What seems clear is that her abilities were not only very different from her brother's⁴ but also slower to mature.

Even so, throughout the 1920s Simone enjoyed a stellar school career, attending prestigious institutions such as the *École Normale Supérieure*, where she was not only one of the first women graduates but also achieved top honors in philosophy.⁵ The intensity of her moral attachment to leftist causes garnered for her what would now be considered sexist nicknames: "The Red Virgin" and "The Categorical Imperative in Skirts,"⁶ for instance. While these ways of talking may be unkind, they nevertheless give a faithful indication of the dominant impression that her personality made on others, both men and women, throughout her life: humorless, perfectionist, severe, and very, very committed. Simone Weil, it is conceded by all her biographers, was generally a difficult and unlikable human being.

Once she began her teaching career in 1931, she continued her more or less Marxist activism during spare time, vacation time, and on leaves of absence.⁷ These involvements took the form of donating part of her salary to workers' movements, teaching night classes to workers, leading strikes, participating in street demonstrations, working on farms and in

introduction to *Oppression et Liberté* (Oppression and Liberty), by Simone Weil (n.p.: Editions Gallimard, 1955), trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), v.

² Ellert, v.

³ Springsted, 13.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ellert, vi; "Biographical Note," in *Waiting for God*, by Simone Weil, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951; reprint, New York: Harper/Colophon, 1973) viii.

mines for low wages, and contributing articles to journals with titles like *Révolution Prolétarienne*.⁸ In 1934 – 1935, and in spite of her lifelong delicate health which included crushing migraine headaches, she undertook a period of unskilled labor in several Parisian factories including that of Renault.⁹ And in 1936, although she was a pacifist, she served briefly at the front in the Spanish Civil War, not surprisingly with the anarchist-syndicalist elements, on the republican side.¹⁰

It was during these years – mainly between 1935 and 1938 but occasionally thereafter too – that Weil the agnostic had a series of profound mystical experiences,¹¹ not Jewish but Christian in content, ones that began the long process of her spiritual evolution in the direction of the Roman Catholic Church. From this time onward her thinking and writing, although still concerned with social and political matters, turned in a more philosophical and religious – and specifically Christian – direction.¹² This period of Weil’s life is extremely interesting and the relevant portions of Francine Gray’s recent biography, *Simone Weil*, and Weil’s own “Spiritual Autobiography,” included in the posthumous *Waiting for God*, are worth reading.

It was only after the Nazi invasion of Prague that Weil finally gave up her pacifism, and she and her parents fled Paris just ahead of the German army in June 1940, eventually settling in Marseilles, in Vichy France.¹³ There she found new projects – distributing anti-Nazi literature, visiting prison camps – but also continued her spiritual studies and reflections and encountered the two persons who would be her main philosophical and religious

⁸ Springsted, 15; Ellert, vi.

⁹ “Biographical Note,” viii; Springsted, 15, 17.

¹⁰ Springsted, 17.

¹¹ Springsted, 18-20.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid.; “Biographical Note,” ix.

interlocutors during this last period of her brief life, Fr. Joseph-Marie Perrin and Gustave Thibon; these two men would also be her literary executors.¹⁴

In May of 1942 Weil and her parents were able to sail to Casablanca, Morocco, and from there to New York.¹⁵ With her parents safely in America, Weil returned to London in November 1942 to work for the Free French organization there.¹⁶ She had devised an extravagant plan that involved her personal return to France for behind-the-lines service, but instead, wisely I think, the Free French set her behind a desk and put her to analyzing reports.¹⁷ There she produced a prodigious amount of very interesting writing, including novel reflections on social and political problems, in the remaining months before her physical collapse in April 1943.¹⁸ Taken to Middlesex Hospital, she was transferred in mid-August to a sanitarium in Ashford, Kent, where she died at the end of the month,¹⁹ aged 34, after a life as intense and varied as it was brief.

Her death, officially ruled a suicide by means of the refusal to eat due to mental disturbance, is no less controversial than her life.²⁰ The coroner's findings have been widely debated. Was it really suicide or was it an accidental death? If it was suicide, what sense are we to make of it? Was she an ordinary anorexic or did she starve herself in solidarity with the meager rations allotted her countrymen in occupied France? Or was her death perhaps some kind of spiritual, rather than political, gesture? The variety of answers to these questions cannot be canvassed here, although it seems plain that Weil's death was hastened by years of

¹⁴ Springsted, 20; "Biographical Note," ix-x; Ellert vii, xii.

¹⁵ "Biographical Note," x.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Springsted, 20-21.

¹⁸ "Biographical Note," xi; Springsted, 21.

¹⁹ "Biographical Note," xi.

²⁰ Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: biografica di un pensiero* (Simone Weil: an intellectual biography), trans. Joseph R. Berrigan (N.p.: Garzanti Editore s.p.a., 1981; reprint, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 2 (all page references are to the reprint edition).

self-neglect of her never very robust physical constitution, by too much work, by too little rest, and by far too many hand-rolled cigarettes.

In any case, her life is certainly one worth reading and thinking about, and as a first approach the recent biography by Francine Gray can, again, be recommended as can the reminiscences of her, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, by Fr. Perrin and Gustave Thibon.

Turning to my main topic: I will begin by offering two stipulations, the first concerning what it means to have or to be a “mystical self.”

In his book *Christian Spirituality*, Alister McGrath proposes a variety of working definitions of spirituality, or mysticism, culled from various authors on the subject.²¹ Those definitions’ common core is what can be called the “little trinity” of God, person, and action: in experiencing God, the person is changed, and that change expresses itself in the living of a certain sort of life. Differently, mysticism is transformative encounter with God, and a mystical self is one that has been so transformed. What sort of transformations or changes are we talking about?

One branch of the Christian tradition that has given a great deal of attention to the mystical self is Orthodoxy. There, man’s perfection is conceived as deification, or theosis, or assimilation to God.²² Setting aside for economy’s sake a lot of philosophical and theological detail, this means that the person renounces his individual, egoistic, self-focused, competitive will, the will that is defined by his own preferences and conception of good, in favor of union with God’s will.²³ Union in this case means that the person wills as God wills, wills the good that God wills; he becomes *like* God, retaining his human nature but permitting that nature to

²¹ These are found on pages 3-4 of Alister McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: an Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999; reprint, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

²² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 114, 117.

be animated by, and consequently to act in accordance with, divine energies.²⁴ It is worth emphasizing that the unity of a person's will with God's will does not mean that the person has become a puppet of God – a slave or zombie whose personhood is just an extension of his master's. It is more akin to the phenomenon referred to as two persons becoming of one mind; there are still two minds, of course, but they will in perfect harmony.

To answer the question asked a few paragraphs back, the sort of changes one sees when someone becomes a mystical self is that where once there was self-preoccupation there is now a self who loves. This is not love that is a form of selfish attachment but one that is, according to the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément, “unselfish...founded on respect;” it is “a disinterested affection that does not ask to be paid in return.”²⁵ It “takes us out of ourselves enabling us to ‘feel with’ the other person and indeed to ‘feel in’ him or her.”²⁶

The concept of the mystical self is well summarized by Maximus the Confessor: “[t]he spirit that is united to God by prayer and by love acquires wisdom, goodness, power, beneficence, generosity...in a word, that person bears the attributes of God;” and: “[t]he creature, having by deification become God, no longer displays any energy other than the divine, so that in everything from now on there is only one energy belonging to God and to his elect.”²⁷ So here are the three elements mentioned earlier: God, person, and action, where the person is transformed by encounter with God, and that transformation manifests itself in actions imbued with a certain character, possessing a certain spirit. To be a mystical self is to live a life informed by, and thus united to, God's energies.

²³ Ibid., 122, 123, 124.

²⁴ Ibid., 124, 155.

²⁵ Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 270.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Charity*, qtd. in Clément, *Roots*, 265; and, Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, 7, qtd. in Clément, *Roots*, 267.

My second stipulation concerns what political emancipation is. For the purposes of the present discussion, political emancipation will mean the overcoming of those features of the existing state and of current society that impede the achievement by men and women of their good. Examples of such impediments would be: too little free speech, too much free speech, conformity to arbitrary and narrow social norms enforced through force, excessive tolerance of deviant lifestyles, religion's implication with politics, religion's exclusion from politics: whatever stands between where we are and where our good lies.

The contradictory mix of examples in the last paragraph is not accidental. It is intended to suggest that any conception of political emancipation must do at least three things that can be thought of as the “what,” the “how,” and the “whether” of political theorizing. The “what” and the “how” are obvious. First, any political program must specify what human good consists in (and by implication what sort of human good is obstructed by current political and social arrangements). Second, it must set forth what changes need to be made – how we need to alter our common, public life – in order to achieve or permit attainment of that good.

Less obvious is the “whether,” and it is a point that most political theorists skip: it is the question of whether the achievement of their vision of political emancipation is possible at all. It is a tribute to Simone Weil's toughness of mind that she does indeed both ask and answer this third question (as well as the first two) in both her early *Oppression and Liberty* (1934) and her late *The Need for Roots* (1943), the two of her works that will be of primary concern in what follows.

Weil's 1934 *Oppression and Liberty*, one of the two works that she herself characterized as a *magnum opus*, is in fact not a single work at all but a collection spanning

the period of 1933 through the year of her death, 1943, partly of essays and short writings published in magazines or journals and partly of “loose pages found among [her] papers after her death.”²⁸ So in a way although the words and ideas are Weil’s, the book is not.

Nevertheless it is fair to characterize *Oppression and Liberty* as an early work, if only because its centerpiece and the essay with which I will be mainly concerned, “Reflections concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression,” takes up nearly half the book and dates from 1934.

Oppression and Liberty has four main concerns. First, there is a critical appreciation of Marx and Marxism. Second, Weil critiques the society of her day in terms of an implicit set of ideals. Third, she explicitly sets forth those ideals. And finally, she reflects upon those ideals’ potential for realization. In what follows I will be concerned with her views on Marx and Marxism only in passing, although from what Weil says about her society it will be clear that Marx’s, especially the early Marx’s, is the long shadow that falls across the pages of *Oppression and Liberty*. This is particularly so in her preoccupation with what she views as the modern world’s separation of the spiritual from the manual dimensions of labor and in her vision of labor as the forge at which human beings create themselves.

Knowing only this much, one might expect Weil’s view of the society around her to be bleak and indeed it is, both in her estimation of society as such and as a milieu for persons to work in.

Society itself has become a frankly contemptible, destructive thing, Weil tells us: a “machine in which nothing is made to man’s measure, “ “a machine for breaking hearts and

²⁸ Simone Weil, *Oppression et Liberté* (Oppression and Liberty) (n.p.: Editions Gallimard, 1955), trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), unnumbered footnote on pg. 156; and, Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil*

crushing spirits, a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, dizziness.”²⁹ Elsewhere Weil asserts that the entirety of society, public and private, has been “poisoned:” work has become a source of humiliation; leaders of industry have lost their confidence in progress; progress itself has brought “physical and moral wretchedness;” science has become a jumbled heap, shards of knowledge beyond anyone’s ability master; art has become confused; “family life has become nothing but anxiety;” and on and on.³⁰ She says that “[w]e are living through a period bereft of a future.”³¹ Or not *quite* bereft of a future, for “[i]t seems fairly clear that contemporary humanity tends pretty well everywhere towards a totalitarian form of social organization.”³² The list of Weil’s grievances is long, but suffice it to say that Weil was a woman very much of her times, one who with others of her generation sensed “Europe’s vitality...at an end,” “incapable of self-renewal,” and she therefore “articulated the contemporary European mood of crisis and decay.”³³

Weil’s assessment of her world as a milieu for persons to work in is just as grim. What workers need, but have lost, are control, comprehension, and autonomy in the workplace. The skilled workman has largely disappeared; now there is a loss of freedom, initiative, and intelligence in the performance of jobs, workers having become “living cogs” and “passive instruments” in their places of employment,³⁴ mere extensions of the machines they work at. Skilled and understanding workers have been replaced by unskilled ones

(Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), xvii. According to Dietz, the other of her works that Weil referred to as a “magnum opus” was *The Need for Roots*.

²⁹ Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 108.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³² *Ibid.*, 116.

³³ James D. Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 7, 9.

³⁴ Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 10, 11, 12.

familiar only with specific tasks; even technicians and engineers have increasingly narrow competencies, and “it goes without saying that the technicians are ignorant of the theoretical basis of the knowledge which they employ.”³⁵

What all this amounts to is oppression; but the problem is not that there are rules and limits, which are inevitable in any society, but that some persons are at the disposal of others, those who perform tasks being at the mercy of those who coordinate them with the latter exerting a “crushing physical and moral pressure” on the former.³⁶ In this there is the destruction of the dignity of those below, a disregard for their human qualities.³⁷

What is clearly at stake for Weil is the individual person’s capacity to create himself through work. The dignity blocked and destroyed in the workplace is the dignity to be or to become fully human. It is not that the worker languishes in forced inactivity; in fact, he is required to be so frantically active that there is no real opportunity for thought. The problem is that someone else assigns his tasks and the manner of their execution to him and he has no say except perhaps at points of inconsequential significance. Without autonomy of thought and of action in one’s engagement with the world, we are blocked from doing our humanity. “The powerful forces that we have to fight are preparing to crush us; and it is true that they can prevent us from existing fully, that is to say from stamping the world with the seal of our will.”³⁸

In summary, Weil’s critique of society is of an inhospitable and inhumane place in general and especially so at work. It is a situation that she would aptly summarize in a selection included in *Oppression and Liberty* – but one written in 1943 – as man’s

³⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

³⁶ Ibid., 55-56.

³⁷ Ibid., 128.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

“subject[ion] in his entire being, both in mind and in flesh, to a blind force, to a necessity completely indifferent to the good.”³⁹

The ideals in terms of which Weil critiques her society would be easy to surmise even if she did not discuss them explicitly. But she does so discuss them and in doing so brings her sprawling social and political concerns into sharper focus.

We must not “forget the goal we are aiming at,”⁴⁰ Weil writes. What is that goal? “[T]he revolutionary ideal...[is]...the abolition of social oppression.”⁴¹

[W]e want to make the individual, and not the collectivity, the supreme value. We want to form whole men by doing away with that specialization which cripples us all. We want to give to manual labour that dignity which belongs to it of right, by giving the workman the full understanding of technical processes... and to provide the understanding with its proper object, by placing it in contact with the world through the medium of labour... We want to give back to man, that is to say the individual, the power which it is his proper function to exercise over nature, over tools, over society itself; to re-establish the importance of the workers as compared with material conditions of work...⁴²

Man himself and his self-creation through labor are to become society’s centerpiece, labor that exercises mind as much as body. Bureaucracy and specialization are no longer to impede his material and cognitive engagement with, and mastery of, nature. The ideal society is one where man has recovered control, cognizance, and autonomy and is thus master and maker of his life. It is a society in which his life is no longer something that happens to him but something that he creatively and sapiently does. “[T]here is no other source of discipline for man than the effort demanded in overcoming external obstacles... It is the obstacles we encounter and that have to be overcome which give us the opportunity for self-conquest.”⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁴¹ Ibid., 55.

⁴² Ibid., 19.

⁴³ Ibid., 84.

Weil makes her ideal still clearer by articulating a distinctive conception of freedom. “True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action; the absolutely free man would be he whose every action proceeded from a preliminary judgment concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end.”⁴⁴ Hence success in achieving one’s goals is not the mark of liberty; the test of free action is whether the individual has autonomously set his or her goals, part of that being his or her taking account of what is possible in the given circumstance, and proceeded methodically toward the goal.⁴⁵ Weil’s idea is for “[m]an [to] have his fate constantly in his own hands; at each moment he would forge the conditions of his own existence by an act of mind.”⁴⁶ No longer the plaything of industrial processes, experts’ secret knowledge, or faceless bureaucrats, the worker is freed to create his world and thereby himself.

Weil’s famous, or notorious, model of this ideal is solving a problem in arithmetic or geometry. “As for complete liberty, one can find an abstract model of it in a properly solved problem in arithmetic or geometry; ...a completely free life would be one wherein all real difficulties presented themselves as kinds of problems, wherein all successes were as solutions carried into action.”⁴⁷ Everything relevant would be given or known, and by methodical application of the mind to those givens a correct answer could be arrived at.⁴⁸

Later in *Oppression and Liberty*, Weil gives more realistic, concrete examples of what she considers desirable forms of work: a fisherman, a medieval craftsperson, a builder or carpenter on a job site where there is scope for discussion of methods based on genuinely

⁴⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 86.

independent insight into the specific difficulties at hand.⁴⁹ It is clear from Weil's descriptions that what attracts her about these forms of labor is their autonomy, their potential for intelligent reflection on problems and methods of solution, the directness of the relationship between effort and end-product, the comprehensive view of the task that is possible in them, and so on. And working a mathematical proof does, in a way, epitomize initiative, independent action, insight, care, and clear-sighted understanding, factors that can, and often do, deliver one from subjection to external forces.

So in summary, Weil's ideal is of a society in which persons are free to set, plan, and execute tasks to the degree possible within the material limits that apply, an emancipated society where the individual grapples directly with "naked necessity, without his being able to expect anything except through his own exertions, and such that his life is a continual creation of himself by himself."⁵⁰ This vision of emancipation is to be taken into the social realm by limiting as far as possible the need for, and advantages of, bureaucracy, expertise, and specialization by creating a society of small, democratic work groups where each member has a grasp of the task at hand, its place in the project of which the task is a part, and of the society as a whole. The deepest root of this vision is that of man as fully himself, claiming his good, insofar as he is in creative interaction with the world.

Turning to the final, and darkest, element of Weil's argument, her assessment of her ideal's potential for realization, she writes, "[t]he problem is, therefore, quite clear; it is a question of knowing whether it is possible to conceive of an organization of production which, ... would enable these [the advantages of coordinated work]... to be exercised without

⁴⁸ Ibid., 86-87.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 87.

grinding down souls and bodies under oppression.”⁵¹ Weil says that if the answer is Yes, if meaningful improvement *is* possible, then we are to strive mightily for such improvement; if the answer is No, we can resign ourselves to oppression and at least cease feeling bad because we are not doing anything to overcome it.⁵² And Weil’s answer, with a bit of waffling, is: No, the ideal of emancipation is not one that can be realized. She has a great deal to say about this but in general gives three reasons.

The first is that modern societies are inevitably oppressive because of the direction their development has taken. Weil reasons by a kind of narrative. In a pre-social state of nature, she says, men are subject to necessity both in the subject-centered sense of the human requirements for food, shelter, and so forth, and in the object-centered sense of the world’s limits and possibilities from which, and within which, man must wrest his existence.⁵³ At this primitive level, men are free with regard to one another because they are in no sense dependent on one another.⁵⁴ In escaping from their dependence on nature and in coming to dominate nature, however, a coordination of effort becomes necessary; this means its rationalization in the form of bureaucratic administrative control and a specialization of tasks, the payoff being “gigantic works which would be infinitely beyond the scope of a single man” and the amassing of reserves “for meeting needs not actually felt.”⁵⁵

Coordination of tasks amplifies work’s return in goods.

But this emancipation is a false one. First, the improvement in individuals’ material conditions is slight; second, oppression by nature has only been exchanged for oppression by

⁵¹ Ibid., 56.

⁵² Ibid., 84.

⁵³ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 49, 62, 63.

other men.⁵⁶ Moreover, workers are now enslaved to their machines, specialization deprives the workers of understanding of their tasks, demoralizes them, and makes them “passive instruments of production:” the separation of intellectual from manual labor has occurred.⁵⁷ Nor is political life any better, for there too specialization has led to the splitting of administrators and bureaucrats from the general population; “[t]he whole of our civilization is founded on specialization, which implies the enslavement of those to execute to those who co-ordinate; and on such a basis one can only organize and perfect oppression, not lighten it.”⁵⁸

We can see that what is fundamentally objectionable to Weil is that at any point in a work task where the intentions, wishes, commands, or plans of the manager interrupt the thought-action relationship of the worker, freedom is, by definition, short-circuited; the worker’s self-creation through free labor is annulled when a task is taken out of his hands because it is not his own conception of it and its execution that directs his efforts. The conditions for the possibility of free action, and hence of the workers’ full humanity, are removed when thought and action are severed.

The second and related obstacle to emancipation is the pursuit of power.

According to Weil, the relationship of oppression and subordination which results from economic advancement is never an altogether accomplished fact,⁵⁹ and what she has in mind is that in spite of oppressors’ best efforts – propaganda, exhaustion, and a daily helping of what Colin Dexter’s fictional detective, Inspector Morse, calls “the steady drip, drip, drip of little insults” – the downtrodden never quite resign themselves to their situation. “Never,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 62-63.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 41-42.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 67.

whatever may happen, can he [man] accept servitude; for he is a thinking creature.”⁶⁰

Moreover, as pointed out earlier, human beings are active and hence, unlike things, try until their dying breath to squirm away from the dispositions others have made of them.⁶¹ There is, then, never real power, and by this Weil has in mind the secure dominion of one man over another; there is instead only a perpetual chase after such stability, the currently powerful trying to fix present arrangements and the oppressed trying to upset them.⁶² Where such reversals *do* occur, it is only the replacement of one set of oppressors by another.⁶³

“Oppressor” and “oppressed” are for Weil akin to roles in a play; different actors may step in but *some* actor always assumes every part and the course of the action is ever the same.

The final obstacle to emancipation is, bluntly, that there are other people at all; “another factor making for servitude... is...the existence of other men.”⁶⁴ By this Weil means more than that others are the most proximate instruments of oppressive social conditions. The problem as she sees it is that unlike matter, “the human mind can never be understood or handled from the outside.”⁶⁵ Thus to the extent that we depend on others we do not control our lives and “judgment and resolution no longer have anything to which to apply themselves; instead of contriving and acting, one has to stoop to pleading or threatening.”⁶⁶ What Weil has in mind is persons’ free mutability: we change our minds without minutely consulting those who might be affected by those changes; have hidden, even unconscious, motives – persons simply lack the solid predictability of things.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁶¹ Ibid., 66-67.

⁶² Ibid., 67.

⁶³ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

And as bad as dealing with individuals is, dealing with society is worse “to the second power.”⁶⁷ Weil has it that “if there is one thing in the world which is completely abstract, wholly mysterious, inaccessible to the senses and to the mind, it is the collectivity... [B]etween man and this universe... the relation oppression-servitude permanently sets the impenetrable screen of human arbitrariness,”⁶⁸ the sense of this being that as single persons confound our plans, the social world does so to the *nth* degree. Whatever slight measure of reliability individuals may possess is wiped away by the scale of the social, where great, unstable gangs of these unpredictable creatures sweep in and out of one's life in crosscurrents whose consequences no one can foresee.

Is any sort of collaboration a possible way out? No, for “[collaboration] is never absolutely free from rivalry, it gives rise to infinite complications... collective power is a fiction.”⁶⁹ And the possibility of cooperation between the strong and the weak, we are told, is a manifest absurdity.⁷⁰ These points are of a piece with Weil's lifelong suspicion of social groups of any kind – late in *Oppression and Liberty*, for instance, she avers that “[t]he social order, though necessary, is essentially evil, whatever it may be”⁷¹ – here, stemming from her view of others' wills as inscrutable.

So when we combine the oppression built into economic development, the consequent race for power that never ends, and the unsuitability of individuals and of society as materials with which to plan, the prospects for emancipation in Weil's sense seem hopeless. And, indeed, she writes that there is abundant reason to despair, that totalitarianism

⁶⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁷¹ Ibid., 146.

and the destruction of civilization lie ahead, and that hopes for revolution or reform, for salvation from “tyranny and militarism,” are daydreams.⁷²

Weil’s analysis in *Oppression and Liberty*, then, consists of two elements in tension: persons with their good on one side, and circumstances and institutions that preclude the realization of that good on the other. What is obvious is that if it is to be possible to find a way past the impasse formed by the frustration of the first by the second, to achieve emancipation, either Weil’s conception of man and what constitutes his good must change or some part of her understanding of the obstacles to that fulfillment must change, or both.

Turning to her other *magnum opus*, 1943’s *The Need for Roots*: as indicated earlier, when Simone Weil arrived in London in late 1942 and went to work at the Free French offices in Hill Street, she was assigned the task of reading, analyzing, and responding to the quantities of reports flowing in from the Resistance in occupied France.⁷³ A good deal of this material concerned the principles according to which post-war France should be organized; as victory over Germany began to seem possible during that winter of 1942-1943, there were assorted denunciations to be taken into account, not only of the Vichy regime but of the discredited Third Republic as well.⁷⁴ A new beginning with a clean slate was being urged.⁷⁵ Weil’s *The Need for Roots* is her contribution to the question of what factors ought to be taken into account in the post-war reconstruction of France.

The Need for Roots is divided into three parts: “The Needs of the Soul,” “Uprootedness,” and “The Growing of Roots.” Their connection, it seems to me, is not that of an unfolding argument but more akin to the relationship between the movements of a

⁷² Ibid., 20, 120, 121.

⁷³ Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 196-197.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 197.

musical composition: variations, or meditations, on a single theme, which is what the political character of post-war France should be, and why. The point of departure for the first meditation is, of course, the needs of the soul; for the second, the twin concepts of rootedness and uprootedness; and for the third, those of openness and closedness.

The question of what principles should be employed in the reconstruction of France after the war, what factors should shape its political institutions and activities, is answered in the work's first section: according to the needs of the soul.

What are the needs of the soul? Weil identifies fourteen: order, liberty, obedience, responsibility, equality, hierarchism, honor, punishment, freedom of opinion, security, risk, private property, collective property, and truth. Some of these are expected, some less so. But Weil conceives the discussion as an investigation so there is no reason to suppose there cannot be more needs, fewer needs, the telescoping of some into others, or other modifications to her list.

Each of these proposed needs is implicated with collective, political life in one way or another. Responsibility, it turns out, partly means for a person to feel indispensably useful to the economic life of his country.⁷⁶ It also means for him to have to make decisions about public matters in which his own interests are not involved and to understand the full range of activities of the "social organism" of which he is a part.⁷⁷ Even more *outré* needs are presented as politically significant; for example, punishment is to be regarded as an honor by

⁷⁶ Simone Weil, *L'Enracinement* (n.p.: Editions Gallimard, 1952); trans. as *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. A. F. Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952; paperback, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; reprint, Routledge, 1997), 14-15.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

which the criminal is reintegrated into the community and educated to a higher devotion to the public good.⁷⁸

The question, of course, is why France should be reconstructed according to the needs of the human soul instead of some other principle, say, the needs of industry or the historical necessity for the triumph of the proletariat. Weil's answer is far more interesting than her discussion of particular needs.

We are to meet the soul's needs because to do so represents particular, tangible expression of the overriding obligation that is uniquely due human beings as such: respect.⁷⁹ These needs of the soul are to be conceived on the analogy of the needs of the human body, which Weil identifies as "protection from violence, housing, clothing," and, with particular emphasis, food.⁸⁰ Weil's line of reasoning for all this is given in the first few pages of *The Need for Roots* but is actually more clearly and succinctly stated by Peter Winch in his book on Weil. For Weil, "the concept of a fellow human being...*is* the concept of one to whom a certain consideration, or respect, is *due*. We cannot, as it were, prize that away from the other's nature; take it away and we have a different concept."⁸¹

This idea, that respect is built into or logically part of the concept of human being – and, hence, to be the leading feature of our life among human beings – is what Weil means when she writes that we have an unconditional obligation to each and every human being, whether or not we acknowledge it, because "he or she *is* a human being, without any other condition required to be fulfilled," and that the nature of that human obligation is respect.⁸²

⁷⁸ Ibid., 20-21.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: the Just Balance*, Modern European Philosophy, ed. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1989) 115 (italics in original).

⁸² Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 4-5, 6.

Need enters the picture because to authentically fulfill that obligation of respect means to meet “Man’s earthly needs,” which are both material and moral.⁸³ And the political enters the picture not only because of the raw fact that there are others among whom we live but because collectivities themselves are unique milieux that serve as custodians of “spiritual treasures,” repositories of accumulated wisdom and points of departure for thought and action on the part of current and future generations, and therefore demand tending and defense in their own right.⁸⁴ The idea here is that just as certain sorts of plants require certain sorts of soil to flourish, so it is with persons and virtues.

We can see behind all this a point of similarity with *Oppression and Liberty* and a line of thought that will run straight through to the end of *The Need for Roots*, and that is the conception of political life as something that human good as its centerpiece.

[I]t is an eternal obligation towards the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance. This obligation being the most obvious of all, it can serve as a model on which to draw up the list of eternal duties toward each human being.⁸⁵

But the good that orients the political is not only a collection of particular, concrete goods, material and moral, but is also *the* good, the ultimate object of man’s restless yearning towards which we are drawn by a “desire, perpetually stirring in the depths of our being,” one “which is unique, unchanging, and identical with itself for every man.”⁸⁶ It is a good that stands behind and is adumbrated in proximate or lesser goods: for instance, we are said to “love the beauty of the world, because we sense behind it the presence of something akin to that wisdom we should like to possess to slake our thirst for good.”⁸⁷ This concept of human

⁸³ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 7-8.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 10.

beings as possessors of a fundamental orientation toward good, *the* good, is of huge importance in understanding *The Need for Roots* and is repeated over and over in various ways, some of which will be discussed later in this essay.

So the essence of Weil's discussion of France's future from the perspective of the needs of the soul is its stress on the mutuality of care owed by persons to other persons in view of the unique kind of beings that humans are. To fulfill this obligation of respect is to give to other persons what is their due as human beings and serves as the measure of success and health for collectivities and as a guide to their reform or abandonment.⁸⁸ Failure by individuals to mediate the good to others in concrete ways is characterized as "crime,"⁸⁹ and such failure by collectivities is, it is clear, to be regarded as at minimum a dereliction of duty.

In *The Need for Root's* second section, "Uprootedness," the question of what principles should be employed in the reconstruction of France after the war, what factors should shape its political institutions and activities, is answered: by avoiding uprootedness and fostering rootedness. The link between this section and the one that preceded it is that rootedness is said to be "perhaps the most important...need of the human soul...[and]...one of the hardest to define."⁹⁰

So what *are* rootedness and uprootedness? What Weil tells us is that persons have roots in virtue of being natural and active participants "in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future,"⁹¹ but this is imprecise. Weil clarifies what she means in the following way.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 8-9.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Uprootedness in towns means: wage earners' complete dependence upon and preoccupation with money; unemployment; education that is excessively specialized and fails to possess "any window opening on to the world beyond;" workers' being made into insignificant cogs upon entering the world of factory work; the lack of intellectual demands made upon workers in their places of employment, including their lack of understanding of the social value of what they produce; and so on.⁹² This is, roughly, the terrain of *Oppression and Liberty*, and Weil's complaints are largely the same: the separation of the spiritual and material aspects of labor. As remedies she proposes: revival of certain medieval guild practices pertaining to apprenticeships; wage safeguards; decentralization of the workplace into small workshops or "industrial organisms;" invention of less exhausting machines; greater demands on workers' intelligence and initiative; greater autonomy in the execution of tasks; greater integration of work and non-work even to the extent of workers bringing their families to their places of employment, giving children a head start on understanding the nature of work and employment; greater access for industrial workers to high culture via general education; and so on.⁹³ These recommendations, too, are familiar from *Oppression and Liberty*, as is their goal: "Man's dignity in his work."⁹⁴

But where *Oppression and Liberty* was concerned exclusively with industrial workers, *The Need for Roots* also addresses the situation of "peasants:" agricultural workers. They, too, are uprooted, although not as thoroughly as urban workers.⁹⁵ Peasants' chief problem is a sense of alienation from the society around them; excessive focus on industrial

⁹² Ibid., 42, 43, 51-52.

⁹³ Ibid., 49, 53, 54, 57, 58, 62.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 75.

workers has left peasants feeling unheard and uncared-for.⁹⁶ Remedies for their situation, a mix of the sensible and the eccentric that is typical of Weil, include: ownership of a small plot of land; a small pension for retired peasants; state subsidized travel, both within France and abroad, lasting up to several years; reforming the terms of peasants' military service; a reorientation of peasants' education and religious services that highlights rural themes and values; and so on.⁹⁷ Weil reiterates that the goal is a "civilization based upon the spirituality of work,"⁹⁸ and so this section is really about extending the already given diagnosis and prescription for industrial workers to their brothers and sisters in the fields.

Last, Weil considers national uprootedness. This is by far the longest single discussion of the book, occupying over a quarter of its length; this is understandable given the book's purpose and the circumstances under which it was written. But the points she makes are neither numerous nor complicated.

The concept of the nation as a sovereign people has been superseded by that of the nation as a "political structure...and the country under its control."⁹⁹ Weil offers a historical narrative, beginning with Richelieu and Louis XIV, to explain how all this came about. Its essence is that Richelieu conceived the state as a thing entirely of this world, shorn of any connection to morals.¹⁰⁰ This self-divinized machine is the France that has come down to contemporary times, with all sorts of ill effects.¹⁰¹ There has been the erosion of fundamentally important loyalties: family has been destroyed; ancestors and descendants are not thought about; connection to one's town or province is nearly forgotten; class loyalty is

⁹⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 79, 80, 82, 84-86.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 122.

tenuous at best; and religion and morality have been made exclusively private affairs, inconsequential matters of taste.¹⁰² The past has been lost¹⁰³ and there is only the state.

Weil makes lots of similar points, some multiple times, but her general idea should be sufficiently clear. In refashioning itself as a false divinity, a terrestrial divinity demanding total loyalty, France has deprived its people of the rootedness that they require, and in offering itself as an alternative – an ersatz *Ultimum* – it both starves and poisons them, encouraging intellectual dishonesty, moral duplicity, alienation, and so forth.

What is to be done?

Weil calls for a new sort of patriotism and a refashioning of the soul of the nation.¹⁰⁴ In essence, this means persons taking a new stance toward the nation and the nation taking a new stance toward persons.

In terms of persons' responsibility, that new patriotism amounts to a political love, a "poignantly tender feeling for some beautiful, precious, fragile and perishable object," and this includes an appreciation of the nation's past, with all of its glories but also all of its flaws.¹⁰⁵ It is a patriotism that recognizes in the nation, first, a culture bed or suitable medium for rootedness where unique ways of thinking and acting flourish and, second, a mediator, or potential mediator, of supernatural goodness to Frenchmen and that is, therefore, worthy of absolute sacrifice.¹⁰⁶ It is, moreover, a patriotism that recognizes that others' nations serve the same purpose for other persons.¹⁰⁷ In other words, the nation is to be of high, but not ultimate, importance, and while it is of intensive importance, applying to its members, it is not of extensive importance in the sense of applying to persons belonging to other nations. A

¹⁰² Ibid., 95, 95, 120, 132.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 140, 142.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 164, 165.

key element of that importance lies in the nation's capacity to mediate to persons what *is* ultimate, again, that perfect goodness that is the object of our deepest desire.¹⁰⁸ Hence, the nation deserves the devotion, care, and protection of its people, sometimes even at the cost of human life.

For its part, “[t]he State’s duty is to make the country...a reality,” something it was not doing in 1939.¹⁰⁹ It is to be a “life-giving agent, ...root-fixing ground.”¹¹⁰ Concretely, beyond being a mediator of good, this means parliamentary reform, the end of party strife, an overhaul of the police system, more severe punishment of corrupt officials, holding the state to a high standard in its administration of the country’s resources, and so on.¹¹¹ Weil saw that after the war there would be a temptation to return to the patterns of the Third Republic, but the war had made a new beginning possible, one based on legitimacy rather than historic precedent¹¹² and of course the opportunity was to be seized. In a crucial and revealing passage, Weil summarized this part of her argument by writing that “[t]he State is [properly] sacred, not in the way of an idol...but in the way common objects serving a religious purpose, like the altar, the baptismal water or anything else of the kind, are sacred. Everyone knows they are only material objects; but material objects which are regarded as sacred because they serve a sacred purpose.”¹¹³

So the vision we are offered as politically ideal is one of increased mutual intimacy, care, and regard between persons and their nation, persons tending to and defending the nation because of its capacity to serve as a means of good’s ingress into the world. The

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 151.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 10-11, 127.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 157.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 158.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 169-170.

¹¹² Ibid., 173.

nation, in turn, is to play its role by in fact mediating that good to its people and by preserving and nourishing their unique form of life.

To return to the question that opened this survey of the second part of *The Need for Roots*: what *are* rootedness and uprootedness?

Judging from Simone Weil's complaints, remedies, and examples, uprootedness refers to the human disorientation, disconnection, fear, boredom, ennui, self-deception, sense of futility, and anxiety that are secondary to the absolutizing of what is properly of only relative importance, and to the trivialization and devaluation of the individual both at work and politically. They are the individual and collective pathologies that grow from wrong valuing. This is the familiar litany of all that is wrong with the modern world – alienation, disenchantment, a general desiccation of the human spirit – that one finds in the early Marx, in Nietzsche, and in many others for at least a century before Weil. It is the heart of the pessimist critical tradition within, and about, modernity. Rootedness, by contrast, means the possession or recovery of connection and stability, finding one's feet in the modern world and feeling at home there. Connection involves recognizing oneself in and being responsive to one's past and future, one's work, and one's political milieu; stability means that the "treasures of the past" that are one's patrimony are preserved to act as starting points and compasses for meeting and making one's future and for approaching the good. Fragmentation and an adversarial posture in the political realm are to become relationships of benevolent mutual custody. This is all very general, but I think that is by design. Weil is speaking about how we have taken a wrong turn in something as basic as how we lead our lives and about what a right turning calls for; the error is global so the language is general.

¹¹³ Ibid., 173-174.

In the book's third and final section, "The Growing of Roots," the question of what principles should be employed in the reconstruction of France after the war, what factors should shape its political institutions and actions, is answered: through a mutual openness to one another on the part of both institutions and persons as contrasted with a mutual closedness. Weil herself does not use the words "openness" and "closedness," but as its title suggests this section concerns how the rootedness that she identifies as the principle according to which France should be reconstructed is to be realized – she speaks of it in the section's first line as "a method for breathing an inspiration into a people"¹¹⁴ – and openness *is* this method and closedness the anti-method.

What needs to be done, in Weil's view, is fundamentally a job of education, creating motives in persons in the form of an awareness of "what is beneficial, what is obligatory, what is good" and that produce effective action.¹¹⁵ This is not to be accomplished via "threats and promises" or via persuasive suggestion but by articulating to the French people the already present secret contents of their hearts.¹¹⁶ The idea is that no coercion or persuasion take place in such education; rather, it is simply calling persons back to their best selves and values, coarsened by long abuse.

The guiding idea for what should be selected among all that might be broadcast by radio to the French people is "[f]irst, the good, in the spiritual sense of the word; secondly, the useful – that is to say, ... useful from the point of view of the war and the national interests of France."¹¹⁷ Those who are intellectually honest will recognize their obligations and responsibilities and will be incited by them to act bravely as surely as if they had been

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 181-182.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 182-183.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 191-192.

given an order.¹¹⁸ Here, as at many other points in the book, we find an echo of earlier statements, in this case of Weil's account of the needs of the soul, of which obedience is one. There, Weil says that "[i]t should...be realized that those who command, obey in their turn, and the whole hierarchy should have its face set in the direction of a goal whose importance and even grandeur can be felt by all."¹¹⁹

The ultimate objective is France's triumphant military and spiritual re-entry into the war and its reconstruction of itself after victory.¹²⁰ Indeed, the mission of the Free French movement in London is really a spiritual one before it is a military or political one.¹²¹

The motif that dominates Weil's program is that of openness. The Free French are to be open to the deepest recesses of the French national heart as well as to goodness, and the French people is to be open to inspiration from the Free French and therethrough to not only the good but also to the obligation to realize that good in the world by respecting one another's soul-needs.

But there are obstacles to realizing "a form of civilization likely to be worth something" and these must be confronted.¹²² They are: "our false conception of greatness; the degradation of the sentiment of justice; our idolization of money; and our lack of religious inspiration."¹²³

Illustrative of what Weil means at this point, a false conception of greatness is said to mean the idolization of force. This occurs when force is regarded not just as something but as everything, the very standard of greatness. What we ought to admire in history are acts and persons "through which shines the spirit of truth, justice and love" and those lesser lives

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 195.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹²¹ Ibid., 206.

which adumbrate these qualities.¹²⁴ We are to love only the good, which is a “single mysterious unity” of “perfect beauty, perfect truth, [and] perfect justice.”¹²⁵ Greatness minus the good is false greatness.¹²⁶

Weil’s point is that if we continue with the sense of greatness that guided France in the past, the French nation will return to one of the primary, pre-war spiritual errors that brought it to its degraded state: the treating of something in this world as ultimate. In that case, the end of the war will simply mean starting once more down the path of distortions and crises with their undesirable human consequences. Through contemplation of lives and actions that are truly admirable, we break that cycle and start afresh; through such openness we are to maintain contact with the good that will serve as our true north as we pilot the ship of state.

At this point we turn the corner into the final topics Weil will consider in this section, and in the book, science and religion, with her remark that a science that presents force as total is mistaken.¹²⁷ Her discussion here, too, concerns openness and closedness, and the latter is the distinctive failing of modern science as contrasted with Greek science, which was not materialistic but, in fact, a religious subject,¹²⁸ an openness to the *Ultimum* via scientific study.

The remainder of *The Need for Roots* is fascinating, especially in its religious observations. Weil’s discussion of miracles is particularly worthy of attention. But the general point she makes is simple: as science has become a consideration of necessity minus

¹²² Ibid., 209.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 218.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 225.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 244.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 233.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 233-234.

good, so religion has become a consideration of good minus necessity. Both are mistakes of closedness.

As Weil sees it, science has lost its original, Greek connection to good and is now just a piling up of facts and techniques. “Science only studies the facts as such....[:] [f]acts, force, matter, isolated, considered singly, without reference to anything else... [I]f you take away its technical applications, nothing else is left which it is possible to look upon as a good.”¹²⁹ What is more, the motivation for the pursuit of science has degenerated into considerations of “[p]rofessional advancement, professorships, rewards of all kinds, honours and money...,” superficialities rather than deeper, or higher, things – truth and beauty, for example, that the human mind can love.¹³⁰

It is worth pausing to note that in this part of the book the word “love” comes up over and over, as in Weil’s view that the scientist should be motivated by “the love of the object which forms the stuff of his investigations. That object is the universe in which we live.”¹³¹ What Weil means by “love” here is openness in the sense of allowing, through the relinquishment of self-interestedness, a union of subject and object: it is not too much to call it a mystical communion. “The savant’s true aim is the union of his own mind with the mysterious wisdom eternally inscribed in the universe.”¹³² Differently, an object is loved when we make no resistance – Weil viewing the self as in significant part a form of resistance – to that object’s full impact upon us. “To desire contact with a piece of reality is to love.”¹³³

¹²⁹ Ibid., 243, 244.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 243, 245.

¹³¹ Ibid., 250.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 242.

Hence, the defect of modern science is its status as idol, a false divinization of facts, something other than the good, and the reverence in which it is held is idolatry. Treated as an end, separate from the good, modern science has the same status as false greatness; it is a meretricious imitation.

And, as one might expect, the defects of science shorn of its religious element are complemented by a discussion of religion shorn of its contact with necessity.

For Weil, Christianity properly understood is concerned with truth. In so viewing it, she relies on Jesus' "I am the truth," and "I am the true bread, the true wine," interpreting these to mean that truth is of indispensable, primary importance in Christianity and to be received as such even before it is received as spiritual food.¹³⁴ Christianity is emphatically not about the meeting of needs in the sense of particular providence; "need is not a legitimate bond between Man and God."¹³⁵

The superior and biblical conception of Providence is as impersonal and impartial; Weil sees this in the admonition that we be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect, He who makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good alike and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.¹³⁶ This being the case, we are to welcome joy and sorrow alike "with the same inward attitude of love and thankfulness," the world in all of its aspects coming from a single source.¹³⁷ Indeed, the suffering of punishment, labor, and even death are to be consented to as obedience to God.¹³⁸ As Rush Rhees observes, Weil regards it as "a confusion to think that 'good' is what meets or satisfies human needs,"¹³⁹ or perhaps better, Weil regards it as error

¹³⁴ Ibid., 237-238.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 237.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 251.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 276.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 285-287.

¹³⁹ Rush Rhees, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, ed. D. Z. Phillips, assisted by Mario von der Ruhr, SUNY Series, Simone Weil Studies, ed. Eric O. Springsted (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 176.

to view as good *only* that which satisfies human needs. In consent to life's travails Weil sees a turning away from the "I," that center of resistance to what God has ordained, and toward that spiritualization of life which is to have labor as its core.¹⁴⁰ Everything, both what suits us and what does not, is capable of serving as a sacrament.

Hence, the failings of modern science and of modern, non-mystical religion mirror one another: science, with its idolatry of facts, has forsaken the good; religion, with its idolatry of self-interested consolation and comfort, has forsaken the world as it is, the necessary. Understood properly, both science and religion are a regard for and contemplation of the truth. "It is one and the same thing, which with respect to God is eternal Wisdom...[and]...with respect to the universe, perfect obedience."¹⁴¹ They are different sorts of appreciation, but not appreciations of different things and certainly not competitive but, rather, complementary.

So the theme of the final portion of *The Need for Roots* is the general method by which rootedness, emancipation from uprootedness, is to be fostered – openness – and consideration of various ways that that project can be derailed – and these fall under the general rubric of closedness.

Turning to the similarities and differences between *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots*: first, and as already remarked, the books are united by their common concern for human good and emancipation from those features of our public life that frustrate the achievement of that good. Such emancipation is offered as the measure of political success. States and societies are good only insofar as they encourage and nurture, rather than frustrate, the full achievement of our humanity. Freedom, the centerpiece of that good in *Oppression*

¹⁴⁰ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 287, 288.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

and Liberty, becomes only one of the soul's needs by the time of *The Need for Roots*, but this represents a development in Weil's understanding of human beings and their requirements rather than a change in the sort of argument that she is making.

Second, human being in both works is something that is achieved rather than an essence that is possessed; both *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots* present human beings as actors rather than as instances. Humanity is an accomplishment, not a given, and our horizon as actors is open although not without orientation. In *Oppression and Liberty* our tropism is for self-initiated creative effort, grappling intelligently and methodically with what is not ourselves in order to impress our wills upon it. In *The Need for Roots* our tropism is for that good that lies outside the world. In this, both books are significantly about how we are to do our humanity and the factors that conspire to keep us from doing it fully and well.

Last, and while other similarities or identities between the two books could be mentioned, the one of greatest importance here is that in both books Weil is setting forth the same sort of argument: a policy argument aiming at the reform of political life. Both of Weil's books, I submit, center on "shoulds" of a specifically political kind.

The two-part question both works grapple with is: ought French public life, and by extension *any* nation's public life, to be conducted according to the principles that France's has been, or ought it to be conducted on the basis of some other principles; and, if according to different principles, which ones? Because both works raise the same issues, the two works can be said to share a single argumentative structure.

More specifically, both books, through their critiques of the Third Republic, answer the first part of the above question – Ought French public life to be conducted as it has? – with a No, and both go on to specify the general principles that should guide the

reorganization of the nation. We are thus in both cases dealing with a policy claim: that the French nation (and, it is suggested, other nations where the same conditions apply) ought to be reorganized according to superior principles. In the case of *Oppression and Liberty*, emancipation from present social and political failings is conceived in terms of creating a society where the reunion of the spiritual and manual forces of labor is not only possible but also encouraged. In the case of *The Need for Roots*, emancipation is conceived in terms of establishing a society where the needs of the soul are met, rootedness replaces uprootedness, and openness between the state and persons and among persons takes the place of closedness.

For these reasons, *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots*, bookending Weil's mature work at its beginning and its end, in addition to other, lesser similarities, offer formally identical policy arguments, each offering a political "what" and a political "how."

But what of the differences between the *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots*?

There are a number of specific differences, some of which have been mentioned. But the key structural difference between the two works centers on the third element of conceptions of political emancipation: the "whether," or workability, element. As already pointed out, *Oppression and Liberty* has it that emancipation, the achievement of free lives, is simply not possible due to specialization and consequent inequalities that aggravate a perpetual struggle for power that inevitably results in oppression and distracts us from our genuine purpose: work that draws upon our intellectual and manual powers alike. Overlaying this and over-determining oppression is the indecipherability of persons to other persons as well as of society to persons, making impossible the kind of methodical planning and understanding that are the essence of freedom.

But in *The Need for Roots*, there is no sense that Weil's vision of a healthily rooted polity is impossible; in fact, the whole force of the book is to encourage and to point the way toward the post-war re-constitution of France, not merely in theory but in fact. To be sure, Weil treats the historical juncture during which she wrote as a moment – and perhaps only a moment – of special opportunity, but the logic of the earlier argument, if carried into the later work, would require that we view such opportunities as apparent only, not real. “Men's desires are powerless to control...[the] giddy race for power... From time to time the oppressed manage to drive out one team of oppressors and to replace it by another, and sometimes even to change the form of oppression; but as for abolishing oppression itself, ...they could not succeed.”¹⁴² Forms of oppression may change, but oppression itself is with us always.

So the change from *Oppression and Liberty* to *The Need for Roots* is more than a change in details; it is significantly a change of logical spaces. The political future has been reconceived to include the possibility of good as well as of bad outcomes. States and societies are now capable of serving and not only of frustrating human needs, rootedness is *really* something we can attain, as is openness: of persons to each other, to the collective, of the collective to persons, and of both persons and the collective to the good.

So at last the question can be asked toward which this entire discussion has been tending: What changed in Simone Weil's political vision that permitted her to see a political future containing possibilities other than oppression? How did she think her way out of the dead end of her early conception of political life?

¹⁴² Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 69-70.

The place to look for answers is, of course, among the conceptual differences between the two books, and a review of *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots* reveals that Weil's early and late political thought differ in three principle ways.

The first is epistemological. I use the word "epistemological" with some reluctance, but there is probably no better term for what is meant. The problems typically grouped together in philosophy texts under "epistemology" are not ones that Simone Weil discusses. Rather, her concerns are, in Winch's words, "with the nature of human beings, material beings in a material world, who think; and with the relation between human thinking and the materiality of the human world."¹⁴³ Knowing is certainly implicated with this, but Weil's interests are both more general and deeper. Let the word "epistemological" here stand for Weil's discussion of thinking and the kind of relationship it ideally gives us with our world. This is a somewhat non-standard usage but inoffensive since it serves only as a label to keep track of one sort of difference in contrast to others that will be discussed later.

To recapitulate Weil's epistemology in *Oppression and Liberty*: in that work she is concerned to articulate what freedom would look like in contrast to then current social and political practices. Persons are said to be free when they grapple creatively with their world by setting, planning, and executing tasks within the material limits of their civilization. This is, in fact, the very meaning of freedom, and the oppressive specialization, bureaucratization, and speed of the modern workplace and of society frustrate its achievement. In Weil's words, the guiding ideal for man is to "have his fate constantly in his own hands; at each moment he would forge the conditions of his own existence by an act of mind."¹⁴⁴ This "act of mind" is, again, methodical thought, an "ordered sequence of operations" that occurs when a person is

¹⁴³ Winch, *The Just Balance*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 87.

“able to conceive a chain of intermediaries linking the movements he is capable of to the results he wishes to obtain,” thereby minimizing chance – what is unforeseeable and threatens planning and the achievement of the person’s purposes – as much as possible.¹⁴⁵

Winch’s characterization is correct: at this point, Weil’s image of thought is of the sovereign individual seeking to dominate the objects of his attention,¹⁴⁶ an independent being who seeks to wring sense and survival from indifferent or frankly hostile surroundings. Thinking aims at mastery of an individual and instrumental sort.

But in *The Need for Roots*, a different sort of thinking takes center-stage. It is not the sort by which “man takes possession of the world,”¹⁴⁷ eliminating as far as possible chance’s power to disrupt achievement of self-given aims. Rather, it is thinking in what Winch calls a “dependent” rather than a “sovereign” mode.¹⁴⁸ This is thinking that is, at root, attentiveness and receptivity to the object of attention. As mentioned earlier, one of Weil’s own characterizations of this kind of thought is, somewhat idiosyncratically, “love:” its object is reality and it is desire for “direct contact with a piece of reality.”¹⁴⁹ The sense of “love” here is “union with” combined with “absence of partiality about;” instead of considering something in light of one’s interests and plans, it is met on its own terms. Love in Weil’s sense is surrender to what is, “whatever it may be,” quite apart from the satisfaction or lack of it that may be connected with such surrender.¹⁵⁰ Here, focus is upon allowing the world to impress itself fully and faithfully on me rather than on my selective, dominating engagement with the world based on my self-given purposes.

¹⁴⁵ Winch, *The Just Balance*, 60; Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 88.

¹⁴⁶ Winch, *The Just Balance*, 12.

¹⁴⁷ Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Winch, *The Just Balance*, 12.

¹⁴⁹ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 242.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

The chief point to be appreciated is that the instrumental view of thinking stressed in *Oppression and Liberty* has been traded for a different, receptive or contemplative view in *The Need for Roots*, one where persons, things, and situations are allowed to speak for themselves and to be heard fully.

A second, and very obvious, difference between *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots* is in Weil's estimation of society.

Weil's view of society in *Oppression and Liberty* is neatly summarized in the single, short observation cited earlier: "[t]he social order, though necessary, is essentially evil, whatever it may be."¹⁵¹ The evil of modern society has two faces: not only does it oppress persons materially, in their workplaces and political institutions, but it has an inherently elusive quality that makes it impossible to draw into the methodical planning that is the essence of individual freedom. And what is true of society as a whole is just as true of the persons who make it up; men both enslave other men and "can never be understood and handled from the outside."¹⁵²

By the time of *The Need for Roots*, however, Weil's estimation of the social was no longer uniformly dark; in fact, the collectivity seemed to her to contain considerable potential for good. Itself due respect as a source of "food" for the living, a source of the spiritual resources with which we may make our way in life, the social had also become the medium of continuity between the living and the dead.¹⁵³ It connects us not only with our contemporaries but also with those who have preceded us, both groups being sources of strength and support upon which we can draw. The difference on this score between Weil's early and late political thought is so stark that one commentator on her political views has

¹⁵¹ Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 146.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 96.

said that if there were not plenty of other evidence of Weil as the author one might think *The Need for Roots* had come from other hands.¹⁵⁴

For all that, it is worth remarking that Weil's late view of society is really a modification of her earlier view and not an outright abandonment of it. Along with their newly discovered potential for good, collectivities retain plenty of potential for harm: hence, her discussion of those among them that inadequately feed the needs of the soul and call for improvement and of ones that devour souls and merit destruction¹⁵⁵ as well as her discussions of false patriotism and of degenerate science and religion, bad collective practices that both cause and express bad social institutions.

The third important difference between *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots* is in their respective anthropologies. By "anthropology" I here mean, "what it is to be a human agent, a person, or a self."¹⁵⁶ This is not a factual concern for how men actually live, what (if anything) marks us off from other animals; rather, it represents a broader interest that is inextricably tied up with a conception of good.¹⁵⁷ It is an idealized self-understanding that proposes not only what persons *can* but *ought* to do in terms of orienting themselves toward each other and the world.

In *Oppression and Liberty*, the human being is a fundamentally active creature that achieves his full humanity through methodical interaction with a world that actively or passively resists his purposes. Here is Winch's characterization of Weil's early anthropology as a self confronting an alien and indifferent world. Man's task of self-creation is what the modern workplace, other persons, and society make impossible.

¹⁵³ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 7-8.

¹⁵⁴ Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*, 150.

¹⁵⁵ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 9.

But in *The Need for Roots* all of this has changed. The fundamental quest for freedom has become the fundamental quest for good. Each human soul (and body) has a complex of needs through which it thirsts for good, both proximate and ultimate. To be sure, autonomy is still a valued component of these re-conceived selves but it is the autonomy of responsibility or stewardship more than of self-projecting action. The edges of the self, so sharply drawn in *Oppression and Liberty*, have, ideally, dissolved.

That person who is the main concern of *Oppression and Liberty* I will call, taking a cue from Winch, the Cartesian self. The reason for doing so is the immense debt owed by Weil in her early thought to Descartes' conception of the self, particularly the Descartes of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, as a sovereign individual grappling with an alien world and the limits that world imposes upon him or her.

Recalling again Weil's argument in *Oppression and Liberty*, the self in question is a solitary being striving to accomplish a purpose: to establish himself through methodical interaction with the world, realize his humanity fully in the face of persons and things that in various ways resist him. This is the self that has been described as part of the "scaffolding" of the modern world, a self that is "logical, principled, calculative..."¹⁵⁸ "At its core, the ethos of the modern world, from Descartes to Freud, was rooted in expectations of *self-command*. In Europe and North America...individual human beings were expected to execute their life projects without letting themselves be 'carried away'...or turning for help to priests or doctors or anyone else."¹⁵⁹ Threatened on all sides by heteronomy – the forces in the world

¹⁵⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 3.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: the Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: The Free Press/MacMillan, 1990), 167 (italics in original).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

without and the chaos of its own emotions within – the modern, autonomous self thinks its way to triumph.

If the self of *Oppression and Liberty* is a Cartesian self, then the self of *The Need for Roots* deserves a name of its own too; I will call it the kenotic self. The word is, of course, Greek in origin and means “empty.” The concept, however, has its roots in early seventeenth-century Lutheran theology. The nineteenth century took up the idea; wishing to stress Jesus’ humanity without, in emphasizing that humanity, neglecting his divinity, it utilized Gottfried Thomasius’ view that the incarnation involved *kenosis*, God’s self-emptying of divine metaphysical attributes – “omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence” – while retaining divine moral attributes – “love, righteousness, and holiness,” all of this suggested by Philippians 2:6-7.¹⁶⁰ It can be seen how both the seventeenth and nineteenth century lines of Lutheran thought focus upon *kenosis* in a negative sense: holding something in abeyance, or setting it aside, or abandoning it.

A different – and in my view fuller – conception comes from the Orthodox perspective, and is articulated by Kallistos Ware:

The power of God is shown, not so much in his creation of the world or in any of his miracles, but rather in the fact that out of love God has ‘emptied himself’ (Phil. 2:7), has poured himself out in generous self-giving, by his own free choice consenting to suffer and to die. And this self-emptying is a self-fulfillment: *kenosis* is *plerosis*. God is never so strong as when he is most weak.¹⁶¹

Here is the positive side of the coin: in addition to the idea of relinquishing divine attributes, the idea of emptying as pouring forth (*plerosis*, also Greek, “a filling up;” *pleroun*, “to fill up”), is present, and one is reminded that “empty” is not only an adjective but a verb,

¹⁶⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 260, 355.

not only something a container (or person) can be but something that it can do. This is the double sense in which the self of *The Need for Roots* is a kenotic self: there is both the clearing of a space and a pouring forth when it is suitably refilled.

This is seen over and over throughout *The Need for Roots*. In the first section of the book, “The Needs of the Soul,” we are urged to relinquish the illusion that we have no obligations to other persons but, instead, rights, claims against them. What resists this realization is “interest and passion,”¹⁶² which is to say that what is properly openness or receptivity to other persons is ordinarily blocked by *self*-preoccupation; the container is wrongly filled. The pouring forth or giving aspect of the kenotic self occurs in meeting others’ needs: “[t]he obligation is only performed if the respect is effectively expressed in a real, not a fictitious way; and this can only be done through the medium of Man’s earthly needs.”¹⁶³ In the work’s second section, “Uprootedness,” we are prominently to take a new stance toward the nation (as it is toward us), seeing it for what it is, flaws and all. This is referred to as a “love” but one without illusions, a love that in the final section of the book Weil, as remarked earlier, will call one that desires “direct contact with a piece of reality.”¹⁶⁴ What we are to clear away in ourselves, then, is distorted political attachment – a selective appropriation of the nation’s past, “the sentiment of national grandeur” – which strikes “a false note,” and in France’s then present straits “fall[s] into the category of compensations.”¹⁶⁵ The positive or pouring forth aspect of kenosis in this section is accomplished in giving the French people a France they can love, and this occurs through the

¹⁶¹ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, revised ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995; reprint, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 82 (page references are to the reprint edition).

¹⁶² Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 5.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 164, 242.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 164, 165, 166.

reform of politics and society to make possible, and encourage, rootedness. Finally, in “The Growing of Roots,” what we are to empty ourselves of are the assorted self-deceptions, partialities, and idolatries that made of France (and Nazi Germany, and science, and religion) what, by 1940, they had become. What we are to pour forth is action according to God’s will when we are totally receptive to it,¹⁶⁶ action that is genuinely great, just, religious, and scientific in ways that are impossible when we are filled with deformed and self-interested conceptions of these activities.

To sum up: the self of *The Need for Roots* is a kenotic self, one emptied of self-preoccupation and illusions and one responsive to other persons, to truth, and to good. It is an instrument of good’s ingress into the world. That is to say, it is the mystic self, one that in its encounters with persons and institutions is one with God’s energies. And this concept of human being is taken into Weil’s late political thought from her religious reflections; it can be found throughout her *Waiting for God* and *Gravity and Grace*, for instance, and not just incidentally but as a religious concept, a way of living arising from a transformative encounter with God.

Still, and even granting that all this is right, it may seem that not much progress has been made toward answering the question of what changed in Simone Weil’s political vision between the writing of *Oppression and Liberty* and the writing of *The Need for Roots* such that in the latter she was able to see the possibility of a political future that did not involve oppression. With the idea of capturing the relevant difference, *all* the chief differences have been canvassed – but which is the decisive one? Or, are they all decisive? And *how* are they, or is it, decisive?

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 286.

The first two of these questions can be answered before the third, and there is a single answer to both: just as there are no epistemologies without persons who know and no societies to be valued positively or negatively without persons to make up those societies, Weil's early and late work and their differences rest upon the bedrock of persons, or rather her idealized conceptions of them that are her anthropologies. In other words, her differing epistemologies and valuations of the social are, at root, differences of anthropology and grow from those anthropologies. And this is what one might expect of two arguments about political policy where current practice is critiqued by reference to different conceptions of human good. To assert that man's good is to be a self-creator who realizes himself in stamping his will on the world, or planning and trying to do so, is the great idea that lies behind Weil's early praise for methodical thought and her condemnation of social relations that inevitably and in a variety of ways block it; methodical thinking is the means of man's self-actualization while the unintelligibility of humans individually and in groups is an absolute obstacle to such self-actualization. In *The Need for Roots*, anthropology is cast in the same foundational role. There, human beings fundamentally seek good, *the Good*, and that good becomes concrete in individual and political action that is guided by receptivity to others', including the state's, needs. As mentioned before, where the self of *Oppression and Liberty* seeks to stamp its will on the world, the self of *The Need for Roots* allows the world to stamp itself on it. Hence, Weil's valorization of a different thinking style – one that is contemplative – and her new optimism about society's prospects for serving human good, this second insofar as the state can be an instrument for mediating good to persons.

Consequently, it is to Weil's late anthropology that we must look in order to see how she finds her way out of the conceptual dead end of *Oppression and Liberty*. What about that

anthropology makes social and political emancipation possible? Differently, how does changing one's sense of what living successfully means make any difference in a world where we are swept along and largely powerless to alter our circumstances?

The answer to these questions will be clearer if I first mention the three great, overlapping motifs in Weil's late, religiously influenced view of the world and its operation.

The first is the powerful impression made on Weil's late thought by Plato, especially in Weil's contemplative orientation to a good that is absolute, the measure and final cause of all mundane goods, something that lies outside the world and yet that is adumbrated by the proximate goods within the world.

Second, the Stoic view of life marks Weil's thought in her vision of the material world as operating according to a necessity that is indifferent to human good but which nevertheless provides a point of contact with providence provided that we take a posture of unconditional acceptance toward it. In this Weil is quite close to classic Stoic sources, especially Marcus Aurelius. For both of them, necessity is a key locus of contact with the divine. When Marcus writes that

[t]he whole divine economy is pervaded by Providence. Even the vagaries of chance have their place in Nature's scheme; ... Providence is the source from which all things flow; and allied with it is Necessity, and the welfare of the universe. ... On these thought rest content[,]¹⁶⁷

his words could have been written by Weil.

Last, there is Weil's marked sacramentalism. Technically rites instituted by Jesus or the Apostles that mediate God's grace to persons through visible signs, there are, of course,

¹⁶⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (Hammondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1964; reprint, Hammondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Classics, 1986), 119.

seven in the Roman Catholic tradition and two in the Protestant.¹⁶⁸ But in this aspect of her thought, as in some others, Weil is really closest to the Orthodox view. While the Orthodox Church accepts the seven sacraments of Roman Catholicism, that number is not taken as exhaustive but symbolic of the breadth and perfection of God's grace.¹⁶⁹ The Orthodox view is that since a sacrament is a mediation of grace, anything can be one, at least potentially; all creation can be understood as a theophany.¹⁷⁰ To underscore this, one writer lists among other sacraments mentioned by Orthodox thinkers: funeral services, icons, relics, prayer, charity, illnesses and other setbacks, chance encounters with strangers, ordinary meals, and on and on.¹⁷¹

This generous understanding is exactly how Weil views the sacraments. "The sacraments," she writes, "have a specific value, which constitutes a mystery in so far as they involve a certain kind of contact with God, a contact mysterious but real."¹⁷² And:

all the accomplished facts in the whole universe at the moment and everything that is happening or going to happen... we must love... as a whole and in each detail, including evil in all its forms... In other words, we must feel the reality and presence of God through all external things, without exception, as clearly as our hand feels the substance of paper through the penholder and the nib.¹⁷³

By "evil in all its forms," Weil means just that. "Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of labour which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease – all these constitute divine love."¹⁷⁴ Such calamities are not encounters with God in the sense of providing Him with opportunities to effect our rescue or

¹⁶⁸ Anthony M. Coniaris, *The Orthodox Church: Its Faith and Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1982), 124.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 124, 125.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁷² Weil, *Waiting for God*, 45.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹⁷⁴ Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Gravity and Grace) (n.p.:n.p., 1947), trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 1952; reprinted, London: Routledge, 1997), 28.

salve our hurts. “The knowledge of this presence of God does not afford consolation; it takes nothing from the fearful bitterness of affliction, nor does it heal the mutilation of the soul... God’s love for us is the very substance of this bitterness and this mutilation.”¹⁷⁵ In the operation of necessity – both natural events which are indifferent to human good and persecution and neglect by other humans, who, through those actions become like inert matter in their indifference to human good – we are to see obedience to God.¹⁷⁶ This is not obedience in the narrow sense of conformity to a specific command of God but in the wider sense of what happens to us being part of the world that God has permitted, one where “the blind necessity attaching to matter” and “thinking persons” rule in God’s stead.¹⁷⁷ another echo of Stoicism. So in Weil’s sacramentalism we can see elements of both her Platonism – the contents of the natural world orients us toward the supernatural – and of her Stoicism – necessity is the medium of our encounter with Providence.

With this background in place, consider what the dead end in *Oppression and Liberty* amounted to: emancipation is presented as impossible because the achievement of human good is permanently blocked by the conditions in which we find ourselves. Freedom, understood as planning and executing projects of one’s own devising, is materially obstructed by specialization, bureaucratization, and the speed of modern society. These conditions are dispiriting, stressful, boring, repetitive, and inhumane. Overturning all this is impossible because developed societies as such are oppressive and promote a continuous, unstable pursuit of power by all parties, but more decisively because neither individual persons nor societies possess the predictability that permits the methodical planning that is the essence of freedom. Weil’s is a critical ideal, of course, and she is intermittently willing

¹⁷⁵ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 89.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 130, 157.

to allow that some improvement is possible. Yet she repeatedly leaves the impression that its degree is so insignificant that the ideal is not a beacon, lighting the way forward, but an index of despair, a bitter reminder not of what might be but of what can never be. At root, the dead end encountered in *Oppression and Liberty* is that our circumstances elude our comprehension and control, or differently, that the achievement of human good necessarily depends upon the possibility of a comprehension and control that not only does not exist but can never exist.

But with the reconception of human being and human good in the late work, good is detached from the idea of comprehension and control; we no longer have to minutely understand the circumstances that impinge on us or get our way in order to encounter the good. For it is not this good or that good that we fundamentally desire but good as such, absolute and pure, and that is only imperfectly imitated by proximate goods, although adumbrated by them. It is also adumbrated and incarnated in evils, great and small, for they are truth and that truth is wafers and wine. Things as they are, even at their worst – painful, boring, even deadly – and unmodified by our intentions and wishes, even by consideration for our basic welfare, manifest the absolute good and thus can serve as points of contact with the supreme good that we ceaselessly and ultimately desire. Hence, good no longer lies only in achievements of a certain kind but can be encountered even where achievement of any kind is impossible.

To elaborate on this: Weil's late view that only God is unconditionally and purely good. The ubiquity of our possible encounters with that good is attested to in *The Need for Roots* when Weil says things such as:

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 158.

Divine Providence is not a disturbing influence, an anomaly in the ordering of the world; it is itself the order of the world; or rather it is the regulating principle of this universe. It is eternal Wisdom, unique, spread across the whole universe in a sovereign network of relations. ...Brute force is not sovereign in this world. It is by nature blind and indeterminate. What is sovereign in this world is determinateness, limit. Eternal Wisdom imprisons this universe in a network, a web of determinations. The universe accepts passively. The brute force of matter, which appears to us sovereign, is nothing else in reality but perfect obedience.¹⁷⁸

In other words, even circumstances that seem most indifferent to our good – natural processes; the appearance or disappearance of remote stars; or, closer to home, the evil, inscrutability, and indifference of men who have no more interest in our welfare than does a hurricane or a flood – are intimations of providence. “That is why the evil they [other persons] cause us should be accepted in the same spirit as the evil which inert matter causes us... , as forming part of the perfect beauty of the order of the universe.”¹⁷⁹ The sense in resenting what resists our efforts disappears when everything as it is can be appreciated as a disclosure of absolute good.

For reality to serve this sacramental purpose, however, we must take it neat, uncorrupted by interest or imagination. “Christ said: ‘I am the truth.’ He also said that He was bread and wine; but He added: ‘I am the true bread, the true wine,’ that is to say, the bread which is nothing but truth, the wine which is nothing but truth. They must first of all be desired as truth, only afterwards as food.”¹⁸⁰ And, again, “[t]o desire truth is to desire direct contact with a piece of reality.”¹⁸¹ To touch the good we must first open ourselves to the true; that is the *sine qua non*; “good descends from heaven upon earth only to the extent to which certain conditions are in fact fulfilled on earth.”¹⁸² Such openness *is* the condition.

¹⁷⁸ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 272.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 237-238.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 252.

How can that be accomplished? “Man placed himself outside the current of Obedience. God chose as his punishments labour and death. Consequently, labour and death, if Man undergoes them in a spirit of willingness, constitute a transference back into the current of supreme Good, which is obedience to God.”¹⁸³ The key word here is “willingness.” Alienation from the good is something we *do*, the activities of imagining and of acting in accordance with imagination, being those project-oriented Cartesian selves. The central irony of such lives is that in living them we run from the very good we ultimately desire. We return to that good – receive it, really – when we consent to the truth and give up living by the principle: “Not thy will, but *my* will be done.” And this means to become kenotic selves because “[i]n emptying ourselves we expose ourselves to all the pressure of the surrounding universe.”¹⁸⁴

Hence, the linchpin of full encounter with the good is a radical change in anthropologies, of conceptions of human excellence, from the Cartesian self of *Oppression and Liberty* to the kenotic self of *The Need for Roots*. The good we desire lies at hand everywhere, not just in successful planning and control; but, crucially, our making contact with that good depends upon being selves *capable* of making contact, kenotic selves, mystical selves, ones sensitive to the full range and depth of sacramental abundance provided to us.

There is only one way of never receiving anything but good. It is to know, with our whole soul and not just abstractly, that men who are not animated by pure charity are merely wheels in the mechanism of the order of the world, like inert matter. After that we see that everything comes directly from God... All the blows, the wounds, and the mutilations are like a stone thrown at us by the hand of Christ. Bread and stone both come from Christ and penetrating to our inward being bring Christ into us. ... We must eat the bread and lay ourselves open to the stone, so that it may sink as deeply as

¹⁸³ Ibid., 286.

¹⁸⁴ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 83.

possible into our flesh. If we have armor able to protect our soul from the stones thrown by Christ, we should take it off and cast it away.¹⁸⁵

The Cartesian self is this armor that protects us from the suffering we do not want but that also alienates us from the good we cannot help wanting.

It is worth stressing at this point what the kenotic self is not. The main temptation for misunderstanding is the error of thinking that Weil is advocating that we sink into a mystical swoon in the face of difficult problems. The kenotic self is not a passive self. Apart from all that has been said already, Weil specifically criticizes the posture of “only being prepared to recognize obligations toward what is not of this world” as “spurious mysticism, spurious contemplation;” “[i]t is only through things and individual beings on this earth that human love can penetrate to that which lies beyond.”¹⁸⁶ From *Gravity and Grace*: “[w]e must eliminate affliction as much as we can from social life, for affliction only serves the purposes of grace and society is not a society of the elect. There will always be enough affliction for the elect.”¹⁸⁷ And, “[w]e should make every effort we can to avoid affliction, so that the affliction which we meet with may be perfectly pure and perfectly bitter.”¹⁸⁸ The idea is that luxuriating in curable misery is self-indulgence, a sentimental fantasy of victimhood rather than its metallic reality.

What has changed in Weil’s view, then, is not her estimate of how much evil can or should be corrected but the significance of the evil that is the residue of even our best efforts. The early view was that its extent entailed that emancipation was impossible. One can think of her general point in *Oppression and Liberty* as a quantitative one; there is simply too much evil that is too well entrenched for emancipation to be possible. The late view is that

¹⁸⁵ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 157.

¹⁸⁶ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 150-151.

¹⁸⁷ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 143.

emancipation is possible both independent of evil's extent and *in* its extent. It is the quality of our encounter with evil (and good) that marks the difference between emancipation and oppression, and the root of that encounter, once again, is being selves of a certain kind – kenotic selves, mystical selves – receptive to every nuance of the world as it is, that world being desired first as truth and only afterwards as food.

To amplify the crucial point being made here, consider three measures of the impact of the kenotic self on Weil's political views.

Considered as a sort of economy, the world of *Oppression and Liberty* is a world of poverty, of scarcity. Good must be achieved or created, but such achievement is beyond our capacity because of the nature of the forces confronting us. Will there be enough good for everyone? Not only *will* there not be enough, there *cannot* be enough, neither for everyone nor for anyone. In contrast, the world of *The Need for Roots* is one of infinite abundance. We accomplish as much good as we can – meeting needs, nourishing roots – but what we cannot accomplish is not a limit that separates us from good but is a different mode of encounter with it. “Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.”¹⁸⁹ And absent scarcity, the endless struggle for power is dissolved. What sense is there in competing for trivial goods when all of them, as well as their lack, give unfailing and infinite access to the final object of desire?

Second, and obviously related to the last point, the fundamental philosophical pairing around which *Oppression and Liberty* is built and upon which its unhappy conclusions rest,

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹⁸⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 132.

control/lack of control, has been, in *The Need for Roots*, superseded by the pairing, acceptance/rejection. We do what we can do, but the root question is not whether the unalterable residue is large or small but the stance we take toward it, the sense we find in it. Can we love it, dreadful as it might be, as manifesting the will of God?

Finally, and ironically, and extending the two points already made – and most importantly for the present argument – through the kenotic self political and social emancipation passes within our control and is no longer dependent upon the predictability and tractability of persons and things. In this as well as in the two previous points one can clearly see the depth of the impression left on Weil by the Stoics' *amor fati*. And in giving up the pursuit of control, we gain it; “[a]nyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:25).

Central motifs of the kenotic self lie beneath all three points: openness, acceptance, taking things as they come rather than demanding that they be as we like them.

Hence, the political dead end of *Oppression and Liberty* is escaped by means of a reformulated understanding of human being and of human good. Emancipation, overcoming present circumstances and achieving human good, is not to be attained by conquering everything that frustrates our understanding and our efforts but through seeing a different sense in what resists us after we have done what we can. That depends in the last instance upon an undistorted encounter with what is real, which means to be a kenotic self – empty of self-preoccupation with regard to God, with regard to other men, and with regard to the world. The linchpin of Weil's late political views is thus the concept of a mystical self, one sensitive on one side to man's needs and on the other to God's energies, because it is the absolute precondition for our attainment of political and social emancipation.

In spite of the profundity of its insights and the ingenuity with which it deploys a religious concept to solve a philosophical problem, Weil's line of thought is open to criticisms. I shall mention just one. It is that she may well have purchased the solution to one problem at the price of creating another that is no less difficult. For the question must be asked: how widely can we reasonably expect her linchpin concept of the kenotic or mystical self to be taken up in persons' political and personal lives? To ask this is to say no more than that the issue of workability bears on Weil's late thought as much as on her early thought. Is her late anthropology actually available as a daily practice for the many?

Consider Weil herself. She was a spiritual *rara avis*, but it is unclear how fully or frequently even she was able to actualize the purity of understanding and action she articulates in her work. In her "Spiritual Autobiography," Weil confesses to Fr. Perrin that everyone she has allowed herself to be vulnerable to and who has consciously hurt her has been abruptly and without warning cut out of her life.¹⁹⁰ This scarcely sounds like the behavior of someone without ego, someone who regards the actions of those indifferent to her good as on a par with earthquakes and landslides. In fact, such excision sounds like an act of wounded pride, and Weil herself speaks of it as a mechanical backlash.¹⁹¹ Second, while Thibon speaks of Weil during their last meeting in Marseilles as spiritually transparent, even luminous, he also says that she was not a woman without ego.¹⁹² He saw in her contempt of the self a form of pride; "[s]he was passionate in her scorn for the passions," detached from her needs but not from detachment itself.¹⁹³ And her astonishing and terrible prayer in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle* – in part, "Father, in the name of Christ, grant me this: ...[t]hat,

¹⁹⁰ Weil, *Waiting for God*, 92.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹² Perrin and Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, 131, 132, 138.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 119, 138.

like a village idiot who does not know how to count or read, and has never even learnt to speak, I may be unable to string together even the simplest thought...in unswerving conformity to your will. ... And that I may be a paralysed, blind, deaf, and senile old fool”¹⁹⁴ – shows that transparency to the will of God was a serious and continuing problem for her. The point is not that Weil was less perfect than she claims – in fact she is always very frank about her faults – but that the level of purity upon which her argument depends is extraordinarily difficult to reach and to sustain.

Therefore, one may wonder whether the kenotic self is a good candidate on which to found political hopes for an entire nation, one constituted by persons who almost certainly have widely differing levels of spiritual ability. I think that we must be skeptical.

I will conclude with three brief observations on what is suggested about Weil’s work if my reading of her political thought is correct.

First, one the enduring puzzles about Weil’s work is its evolution in her final years in a religious direction and particularly the relationship in her late work between the religious and philosophical elements in it. Rush Rhees puts the matter in the following way:

Her [Weil’s] 1933-1934 lectures and her earlier writings on social theory do belong to what I am calling ‘academic philosophy’. And in much of what she says after 1939 Simone Weil seems to write as though there were a continuity, as though she were simply going further, perhaps deeper, in the lines in which she had been working before. It is because she seems to pass from the one way of speaking to the other so easily, as though it were no occasion for comment, that it is so hard to criticise, or for that matter to expound or paraphrase what she is saying. ...

If it were just that Simone Weil wrote in religious meditation and not in philosophy, I should have no complaint. But I feel like complaining that she *mixes up* philosophy and religious meditation, and writes as if she were not even aware that she was doing so. She would tell me this shows how little I understand, and I am sure she would be right. And no doubt I should leave it there: I do not understand. Full stop.

¹⁹⁴ Simone Weil, *La Connaissance Surnaturelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 204-206; quoted in Rhees, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, 108-109, trans. of the prayer, “Exemple de prière,” by Mario von der Ruhr and Timothy Tessin. Rhees quotes this extraordinary and terrifying prayer in its entirety.

But can someone tell me the address of someone who *does* understand so that I might ask him *how* I ought to look at her writings?¹⁹⁵

Various attempts, all unsuccessful in my view, have been made to deal with this very concern, for instance Mary Dietz's more or less psychological approach in her otherwise excellent 1988 work, *Between the Human and the Divine: the Political Thought of Simone Weil*. If I am correct, there is not only a consistency of purpose and of argumentative form between *Oppression and Liberty* and *The Need for Roots* – both discuss emancipation in terms of the attainment of human good – but the religious elements of the late work are not ambiguous add-ons but represent Weil's philosophical deployment of a religious concept, the mystical self, to make a political argument, to overcome a theoretical dead end. It *is*, to use Rhee's words "her going further...in the lines in which she had been working before," and hence her work as a whole possesses a kind and degree of unity not ordinarily appreciated.

The second point is that Weil illuminates the possibility of a vital place for religious concepts in political activism and political discourse that does not involve the espousal of specific ethical or dogmatic teachings taken from one religious tradition or another.

Finally, Weil's work shows how mystical practice need not be conceived as an escape from the world but as its very opposite: as *the* indispensable condition for productive engagement with the world and its problems, particularly those we do not or cannot solve, a point surely of importance to any political activist with a realistic appreciation of the limits of human strength and human ideas.

¹⁹⁵ Rush Rhee, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, ed. D. Z. Phillips, assisted by Mario von der Ruhr, SUNY Series, Simone Weil Studies, ed. Eric O. Springsted (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 85, 86.