The 'void' in Simone Weil and the 'broken middle' in Gillian Rose : the genesis of the search for salvation

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ABSTRACT

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THE 'VOID' IN SIMONE WEIL AND THE 'BROKEN MIDDLE' IN GILLIAN ROSE: THE GENESIS OF THE SEARCH FOR SALVATION

By Gregory David Parry

This thesis aims to examine the respective ways in which Simone Weil and Gillian Rose assess the human condition as the conflict and tension of human life. The use of the notion of 'contradiction' represents conflict. Employed by both women, 'contradiction' will be explored through their assessments of the human condition. With their respective uses of this notion, Weil's and Rose's assessments develop into a wider field of application using very specific, conceptual precepts: the 'void' by Weil and the 'broken middle' by Rose. The essential constructive claim is that each of these conceptualities can properly be viewed as attempts to explore what shall be referred to as the genesis of the search for salvation; the attempt, that is, to elucidate through both women the possibility of negotiating in and with 'contradiction' towards a sense of inner-transformation. This claim is supported by their illumination of what it means to live with, in and through contradiction in the world in relation with God. Given that Weil and Rose identified with Gnosticism, neo-gnostic soteriology, which draws the human condition into a fulfilled sense of self-realisation about the divine, will be used to test these claims made by both women. Despite the fact that they have each attracted significant academic interest over the years, this is the first work to bring these two thinkers into relation with each other.

This thesis is divided into four distinct parts. Part I identifies the wider philosophical, existential and theological issues at play. Part II explores Weil's relation to and use of the concept of the 'void' (that acts as an intermediary between the human and divine) both impersonally and personally in order to uncover her perception of the human situation in relation to God. In turn, Part III explores Rose's personal and intellectual vocation. More importantly, Rose's 'broken middle' will be explored, which broadly speaking, addresses the difficulty and tension (contradiction) of the middle between the universal and the particular. Part IV places the respective accounts of the human condition and contradiction in Weil's 'void' and Rose's 'broken middle' in explicit conversation with each other in order to establish and elucidate what they each separately and together suggest about the genesis of the search for salvation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would firstly wish to acknowledge my deepest appreciation to Professor Ann Loades for introducing to me in the first place, the life and work of the Hegelian Philosopher, Gillian Rose, not to mention her support and contribution to working through various ideas that would enable me to link together Rose's life and work with that of the French mystic, Simone Weil.

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With the labour of love that has gone into this work, I cannot express enough gratitude, appreciation and eternal love towards my family for their unconditional support and commitment over the last several years. Thank you.

This work is dedicated with boundless love to Sri Sathya Sai Baba and John-Roger.

ABBREVIATIONS

Note: A Full bibliography of abbreviations is provided at the end of this thesis.

Simone Weil

CO	*La Condition Ouvriére*
EDL	*Écrits De Londres et Dernières Lettres*
EH	*Écrits Historiques et Politiques*
FC	Frederick Copleston, S.J., *History of Philosophy,* XVII Vols.
FLN	*First and Last Notebooks*
FW	*Formative Writings, (1929-1941)*
GaG	*Gateway to God*
GFP	Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*
GG	*Gravity and Grace*
BHD	Mary Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine*
IC	*Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*
LP	*Lectures on Philosophy*
LTAP	*Letter to a Priest*
MILES	*Simone Weil: An Anthology*
N	*Notebooks*
TNFR	*The Need for Roots*
OL	*Oppression and Liberty*
OC	*Oeuvres complètes*
P	Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*
PG	*La Pesanteur et La Grâce*
PT	J. M. Perrin & G. Thibon, *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*
SE	*Selected Essays, 1934-1943*
SL	*Seventy Letters*
SNL	*Science, Necessity and the Love of God*
SP	S. Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*
WFG	*Waiting on God*

Gillian Rose

CAE	N. Tubbs, *Contradiction and Enlightenment: Hegel and the Broken Middle*
ETW	G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*
HCS	*Hegel Contra Sociology*
JM	*Judaism and Modernity*
LW	*Love's Work*
MBL	*Mourning Becomes the Law*
MSIA	*The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*
PA	*Paradiso*
POS	G.W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*
TBM	*The Broken Middle*

PART I

AN OVERVIEW

Chapter I: Contradiction as a Way of Life

[…] Are you willing to suspend your prejudices and judgments? [1]

1.1 *Introduction*

Stated in the broadest sense, this thesis aims to investigate and examine the respective ways in which the French mystic, Simone Weil, and the Hegelian philosopher, Gillian Rose, assess the human condition as an inner tension or conflict of the human being in the world. Broadly speaking, the notion of 'contradiction' used by both women in their writings, represents this conflict and tension.[2] For both thinkers, this condition is based upon the relationship between two diametrically opposed forces working within the reality of the human being. The one force is this world – human, finite and imperfect – whilst the other is the divine world as all-knowing, infinite and perfect.[3] Their examination of the human condition is about how this relationship appears through an individual's experience of God *in* the world. By addressing, therefore, the human condition through the writings of Weil and Rose, we extend our inquiry into the nature of individual transformation in relation to a divine reality – the genesis of the search for salvation.

Alternatively stated, it will be found that Weil and Rose are each concerned to explore the way in which conflicting events in our thoughts and in our lives are the result of how particular ethical, spiritual or religious ideals have failed to bring about their anticipated fullness and perfection in the experiences of human beings. In other words, failing to acknowledge the value of human conflict for a better or 'other-worldly ideal', is, according to Rose and Weil, an inherent failure to appreciate the difficulty and struggle between two opposing, and often irreconcilable, viewpoints. With both women, this contradiction establishes the division or duality between two worlds – the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite – that have struggled since the birth of human

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[1] Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 72. Hereafter, cited as LW.
[2] The notion of 'contradiction' will undergo further explanation in this chapter in the course of developing several conceptual ideas and terms used by Weil and Rose.
[3] Their representation of these two opposing forces will emerge through introductory discussions in this chapter.

consciousness to meet in harmony and balance.[4] In that case, this thesis will explore Weil's and Rose's own response to this duality in view of their assessment of the human condition. This, in turn, will attempt to establish their belief of how one might begin so to handle tension and conflict in which to also recognise a greater sense of what it means for a human being to live with it in the first place.

This thesis intends to investigate their assessments of the human condition with their view that human existence has a purpose. This purpose is soteriological. In other words, the suggestion is that the human condition is divinely orchestrated for the salvation of humankind. One is not asking whether, or if, our present condition is deterministic or coincidental for the broader investigation assumes, given both Weil and Rose conceived of a supernatural, divine reality, that human life is not just about a series of random experiences. To debate the supernatural validity of human experience is itself irrelevant. This thesis *assumes* that human reality is supernaturally significant and meaningful. The question, instead, is ironically supernatural in itself: what is the nature of their supernatural realities that juxtapose their respective understandings of the human condition? Our inquiry into the *purpose* of the human condition is not just intended to reflect upon the working relationship between the human and divine, but also to recognise this relationship as a transition of the human being from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better one.

With consideration given then to the soteriology of the human condition, the aim is to show through both women how intense and conflicting events can be negotiated to give rise to an inner transformation of the human being in the world. This concern is referred to here as the genesis of the search for salvation. The transforming power in the genesis of the search for salvation will rest with the way the human being relates, in *this* world, to the divine. Asking what illumination both women bring to what it means to live with, in and through contradiction in the world in relation with God will be a way in which to examine their relation (in this world) to the divine reality, and their capacity to

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[4] The American Roman Catholic Theologian, Thomas Weinandy, for example, illustrates this problem between the human and the divine in the manner of how human beings struggle to understand their place in the world and in relation to the divine. See T. G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. vii-x, 26-7. This particular problem goes to the heart of Weil's and Rose's own conception and experience of God in as much as the tension and conflict that emerges in their assessments of the relationship between the human and the divine.

be transformed. This will be a key approach to the development of the genesis of the search for salvation.

1.2 *The Soteriology of the Human Condition*

We have noted up to now that their appraisal of the human condition is defined by an inner-conflict and tension that proceeds from the nature of the relationship between the human being in the world and the divine. This condition and their view of God's relation to the world will be investigated in order to address the human condition as the genesis of the search for salvation. The understanding of salvation will emerge here from the manner in which Weil and Rose in specific ways use and work with contradiction for self-transformation. Their concept of inner-transformation will also take into account their relation to the world and to God. By what means, though, are forthcoming investigations going to test and challenge the respective contributions of both these women in order not only to appreciate the distinctive significance and importance of their respective contributions to the value of human life, but also, to the movement of all theological and philosophical investigations?

Since there is meaning attached to Weil's and Rose's assessment of the human condition it is important to elucidate this meaning within a formal soteriological framework. Not only will this framework help to reflect upon the importance of the tenets of both women, but it will also broaden their contributions to the study of salvation. This framework will reflect upon the individual in the world and his or her relation to God.

In this thesis, neo-gnosticism is the selected framework. It aims to operate as a spiritual subtext with which to test and challenge the way in which both women in their contradictions are self-transformed in as much as assessing the validity of their use of contradiction towards the possibility of inner change. Based upon an elusive religious phenomenon of late antiquity known as 'Gnosticism',[5] neo-gnostic thought is a more

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[5] Gnosticism of late antiquity is a redemptive religion based on dualistic thought. This is a belief system in which an individual is faced by the prevalence of evil in this world, and can only be delivered from it by an unknown, transcendent God. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. Reverend R. H. Fuller (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 193. See also, Alastair Logan, 'At-Onement – The Nature and Challenge of Gnostic Soteriology', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50, (1997), 475-488, (pp. 481-83).

positive, contemporary development and exploration of Gnostic thought than Gnosticism of late antiquity.[6] It attempts radically to re-evaluate the individual, God and the world with an emphasis on the importance of personal transformation. This type of thought aims to guide the human being back to discovering its own essential nature, its true identity, through and in the midst of inner-conflict.[7] Where this 'good news' has been largely overshadowed by the charge of extreme dualism in which the divine is alienated from the human world,[8] the soteriology of neo-gnosticism will be shown to co-operate with this dualism as an experience of contradiction (conflict) in human life which ultimately aims to restore the human being to its true and essential self. Developing the positive side of what is regarded as the negative dualism of Gnostic thought is essential in order to address what neo-gnosticism regards as the importance in the relation between both worlds for the inner-transformation of the individual.[9] Therefore, in spite of the criticisms over the centuries that Gnosticism is dangerously dualistic and blasphemous to orthodox Christian Theology, the intention is to show that neo-gnostic soteriology has a deeper spiritual emphasis on the nature of the human being that traditional Orthodox Christianity has failed to comprehend.[10] In retrospect, neo-gnosticism will aim to emerge with similar viewpoints to Orthodox Christianity,[11] but equally, in dissimilar ways particularly with regards to the Gnostic belief that salvation is mediated in no other way accept through direct access between the individual and God. Even though Weil and Rose identified with Orthodox Christian teachings – Rose went so far as to accept Baptism into

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[6] See, for example, T. Freke and P. Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians* (London: Thorsons, 2001), pp. 3ff; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 5ff; J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries* (California: Academy of Future Science, 1999), pp. 1ff.

[7] Freke and Gandy attempt to present a radical alternative of the traditional picture of Gnosticism, going as far as to suggest that the original Christians were in fact Gnostics. See T. Freke and P. Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians*, pp. 50ff.

[8] See Pagels' account of how the early Church Fathers, Irenaeus and Tertullian, rejected Gnostic understandings of God and their dualistic claims about creation as heretical to the foundational teachings of the Church. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, pp. 55-59; Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 66-74.

[9] See J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries* (California: Academy of Future Science, 1999), pp. 1ff.

[10] See Giovanna Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 3-5.

[11] What interestingly distressed Irenaeus was that the majority of Christians during his lifetime did not appear to recognise any difference between their belief system and Gnostic thought, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 21-52. See also Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, pp. 21-28, 59-122.

the Anglican tradition before her passing – both women had deep reservations about traditional Christian soteriology that not only appeared to be religiously exclusive with its universal and systematic claims about the nature of divine reality, but equally superior and dominant over other belief systems and their perception of divine truth.

But is there any connection between these women and Gnosticism? Why use a Gnostic rather than, for example, a Judaic-Christian model of salvation? Even though Rose was baptized into Christianity and Weil, failing to accept Christian baptism, established her mystical insights on the basis of human suffering through the Incarnation, they both nevertheless identified with Gnostic thought.[12] I will attempt to highlight these connections in further detail a little later. In the meantime, since the broader philosophical and theological themes common to both women are directed towards the possibility of self-transformation and that neo-gnostic soteriology is concerned to bring the human being back to his or her true identity, it would be appropriate to initially suggest that the juxtaposition of both women and neo- gnosticism are congruent to identifying the nature of the relationship that transpires between a human being in the world and the divine.

I have briefly noted that this soteriological movement has this idea of self-transformation by the *way* in which it responds to contradiction through the difference it identifies between the human and the divine.[13] Thus, in turn, the investigation aims to show how Weil and Rose respond to contradiction in a way that is directly orientated towards individual self-transformation, and to test this orientation through their identification with, and moreover the transforming nature, of neo-gnostic thought. The theme of self-transformation through the tension of the human condition is fully explored towards the end of this investigation as the genesis of the search for salvation. In summation, the task of this thesis is to direct their assessments of the human condition towards a revised interpretation of the main soteriological themes of neo-gnosticism.

Having now addressed the broader areas under investigation, it is important to explain, firstly, the relevance of this investigation to 'larger' matters of contemporary

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[12] For further details on Weil, see Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, trans. Rush Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 130-1. Hereafter, cited as SL. See also, J. Cabaud, *Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love* (New York: Harvill, 1965), pp. 218-24; C. Moeller, *Littérature du XXe siècle et Christianisme* (Paris, 1967), pp. 246ff. On Rose, see Gillian Rose, *Paradiso* (London: Menard Press, 1999), pp. 22-31. Hereafter, cited as PA.

[13] This will be argued for in relation to Weil and Rose.

culture and intellectual concern. This will enable, secondly, to launch into, and systematically discuss key concepts and terms that develop precise beliefs and ideas employed by Weil and Rose.

1.3 *The Intellectual and Cultural Significance of Weil and Rose*

In summation, the focus of exploration is to address and investigate, according to Weil and Rose, their respective viewpoints about the human condition. This investigation aims to show that there is an intention to understand and appreciate the significance of the human condition in terms of the nature of the relationship between the infinite and the finite reality for both women. Lastly, this work aims to appreciate the purpose of the human condition in the light of the genesis of the search for salvation.

The relevance and significance of these intellectuals and their work is to be found, it will be argued, in the way in which they each attempt to sustain both personally and intellectually a metaphysical, spiritual reality in a skeptical, postmodern world. In contrast to this world, they are just the sort of interlocutors to help us establish the purpose and meaning of dissonance, ambiguity and paradox. It is important, first of all, to note that each thinker was influenced in this way intellectually by a long philosophical tradition – Plato (for Weil) and Hegel (for Rose) being of major importance,[14] and in Weil's case, Descartes also.[15] Their respective influences on both women can primarily be drawn from their recognition that there is one world of everyday, practical reality, and yet another world beyond the boundaries of common knowledge. In other words, a world that encompasses values, ideals, and most of all mysteries unknowable and not-yet-

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[14] Plato's influence on Weil is evident in a number of her major works. Weil, for example, draws heavily upon Plato in her mystical writings in order to make sense of human misery, or to put it another way, to understand how God connects to human suffering. See, for example, Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, trans. Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London: Routledge, 1957), pp. 74-150. Hereafter, cited as IC. For various commentaries on Weil's use of Plato, see Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983); E. Jane Doering and Eric O Springsted (eds.), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). Hegel's influence on Rose is particularly evident in a number of her criticisms on contemporary social thought, and in particular, her critique of Kant and Fichte. For details, see Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 1-50. Hereafter, cited as HCS.

[15] See Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. H. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 180-81. Hereafter, cited as LP. See also, Simone Weil, *Formative Writings (1929-1941)* eds. and trans. D. T. McFarland and W. V. Ness (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 38-101. Hereafter, cited as FW.

known. As we shall observe shortly, with Weil and Rose, there is a philosophical legacy with these worlds that they each employed in the current intellectual mainstream of their time.

Weil's use of Plato and Descartes can be understood in terms of their respective beliefs in the power and superiority of the mind over and against the body, and therefore, the remote transcendence of the spiritual world in relation to the physical world.[16] This had far reaching repercussions not just on how she experienced life in early childhood but equally in adulthood, but also on her views and beliefs about the divine, the human being in society, and the pathway to spiritual liberation. Rose, on the other hand, was heavily influenced by Hegel, and as with Weil, she was equally influenced by the power of metaphysics and this 'mélange of extreme tension'[17] between the infinite and finite, the mind and body, God and Creation.

What their respective uses of these earlier thinkers entail is to ask how both women used these thinkers to facilitate their own philosophical and theological methodologies. Their perspectives will inevitably be different in places, but the hope shared by these two intellectuals is the revival of metaphysical thinking that has in postmodern culture been subject to scrutiny and skepticism.[18] This 'resurrection' of western metaphysics by Weil and Rose is an important feature of restoring a sense of meaning, purpose and value to human life. For example, contemporary culture tends to either live in the first world (physical) and venture from time to time into the second (spiritual) world, or they appear to fully embrace the 'second world' and disregard the 'first world'. This is particularly prevalent by what has been recognized as the importance of 'personal transformation' in the 'New Age' movement.[19] In any case, these worlds in whatever context they appear are inevitably subject to various degrees of separation and alienation from one another. The aim is to demonstrate whether both women not only integrate these worlds, but if, as it has been suggested, they recover the difficulties and

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[16] See D. Maclellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist* (Macmillan Press, 1989), pp. 26-30.
[17] See Mary Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), p. 105. Hereafter, cited as BHD.
[18] See, for example, Max Charlesworth, *Philosophy and Religion: From Plato to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), p. 9, 156ff. See also, Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. vii-viii.
[19] See Ron Rhodes, *New Age Movement* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 7ff.

tensions of and within metaphysical thinking in order to assist with this journey of 'worldly integration'.[20] Moreover, they attempt through these tensions to enrich both these realities in order to avoid the overriding tendency to affirm absolute truths about modern religious, political, and sociological propositions without more importantly recognizing their failures and weaknesses.

In short, both women reserve some degree of equanimity towards their intellectual and personal pathway. They recognize the importance of not becoming too attached to any one path as the 'only' or 'right' road to liberation. Why this is important has to do with the mysteriousness and uncertainty represented by the reality of the invisible world. Any statement or thing proclaimed to be 'invisible' means that it might run the risk of conflict through the nature of *our* reality in the physical world. In this way, our awareness of the visible world and our insights into the invisible realms become an exercise in paradox. That is to say, what is true in one world is not necessarily true in the other. This is why salvation becomes so important in this thesis because it allows us to reflect upon the way in which a human being begins to wake up and take note of the events and experiences of his or her own world.

In spite of these wider significances, there is a further inquiry that brings us back to the heart of Weil and Rose. Which of the two, coming from different metaphysical perspectives, is able to carry their tension and conflict in light of our soteriological enquiry? The wider issues in which all human beings are intellectually and personally pressed either to close their eyes to dissonance or to coexist with ambiguity is investigated through the writings of both Weil and Rose. The final test for both women (in the genesis of the search for salvation) is to establish in this thesis how both women responded to the self-transforming capacities of these tensions.

Whilst a comparison between Weil and Rose makes this investigation broadly unique in itself,[21] there are closer assessments that have to do with the nature of their

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[20] Considering the nature of the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds are clearly evident through the writings of Weil and Rose. For Weil, see IC, pp. 25ff; FW, pp. 87-101. For Rose, see HCS, pp. 1ff; LW, pp. 35-50.

[21] Rose's criticisms of Weil in her essay, 'Two Angry Angels: Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas', suggest that Rose would have been impartial to any comparisons with Weil. See Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 211-221. Hereafter, cited as JM. Indeed, Bishop Simon

metaphysical explorations on the relation between the human and the divine, and their orientation towards Gnostic thought, that make this investigation unique amongst other investigations into their works. Indeed, to identify the uniqueness of these precise contributions, in as much as to test and challenge them one has to understand the terms, ideas and beliefs employed by Weil and Rose. A discussion of these key terms and ideas is the focus of exploration. Initially, therefore, I will consider how both women viewed the human-divine relationship in order to highlight further areas of exploration in this thesis in as much as to illustrate how this relationship is rooted within their respective understandings of the human condition.

1.4 *An Initial Exploration of the Worlds of Simone Weil and Gillian Rose*

1.4.1: Viewing the Human-Divine Relationship

To understand their assessment of the human condition several discussions have initially to consider the way in which both women approach the divine reality. By doing so, the hope is that one begins to understand the purpose and meaning of contradiction in the sort of conceptual context yet to be established in the work of Weil and Rose. Therefore, it is important now to address their overall conceptions and ideas about God and God's relation to the world.

One finds that both women take the transcendence of the divine reality seriously. As this thesis will attempt to illustrate, Weil's belief in divine transcendence was very much influenced by the ancient philosopher, Plato. Weil, like Plato, believed in the remote transcendence and perfection of the divine under the pretext that a human being is inherently and fundamentally imperfect.[22] For Weil, Plato 'is an authentic mystic, and indeed the father of western mysticism'.[23] Holding to the absence of God in this world and in creation,[24] she set about adapting several spiritual and philosophical ideas from

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Barrington-Ward, who baptized Rose at the end of her life, confirmed this fact to me through earlier conversations on the nature of Rose's intellectual and personal vocation in and with the world.

[22] 'The first thing we know about ourselves is our imperfection'. See LP, p. 90.

[23] Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, trans. Rush Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 92. Hereafter, cited as SNL.

[24] See, for example, Blumenthal's comments in G. Blumenthal, 'Simone Weil's Way of the Cross', *Thought* 27 (1952), 225-234 (p. 227).

Plato[25] in an attempt to inject the supernatural into this world that would develop a human treatise of worldly renunciation and a commitment to human integration.[26]

With a sense of urgency here to reconcile these two worlds, the tension between the human and the divine in Weil's spiritual, philosophical and political writings characterise her assessment of the human condition. The Weil scholar, Mary Dietz, most notably expresses this point. In essence, Weil's life and work can perhaps be understood as an attempt to express 'the persistent "pull" between the human and the divine, or worldliness and exile, that envelopes her'.[27] The nature of this tension will be shown to reside with Plato. Plato marks off the material world as 'evil' that is incapable of conforming fully to the transcendent realms of Ideas or Forms.[28] The result of this is a chasm between God or the Good and everything else that is subject to change, that is, the Platonic realm of becoming. This chasm, as many scholars suggest, is 'problematic for Plato',[29] and in Weil's case, will be shown to be equally problematic with her attempts to resolve it.

The presupposition of this resolution is that Weil's spiritual, religious and political preoccupations represent a dualistic world-view of the relationship between the

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[25] One example of Weil's adaptation of Plato can be illustrated with his conception of the 'Great Beast' – the great, social order that is an obstacle between the human being and God – which appears most notably in her political writings, particularly, in one of her earlier texts, *Oppression and Liberty*: 'The essential idea in Plato [...] is that man cannot escape being wholly enslaved to the beast, even down to the innermost recesses of his soul [...]', see Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London: Routledge, 1958), p. 165. Hereafter, cited as OL. Her adaptation of the 'Great Beast' will be discussed in the second chapter.

[26] The worldly renunciations for Weil include ideas such as affliction and decreation, (abolishing the inner self), and human integration as a commitment to social and political equality through love and compassion. With the nature of these concepts and ideas residing in Platonic metaphysics, they will undergo further investigation.

[27] BHD, p. 106.

[28] This follows on with Plato's emphasis upon the distinction between body and soul, which is beset by the same metaphysical principle as between his material and transcendent world. Weil's interpretation here is crucial towards her intellectual anthologies on worldly renunciation because the distinction between body and soul represents the importance of what she calls 'nakedness and death as a symbol of spiritual salvation'. This entails the separation of the soul from the body and the assimilation of the soul alone with God. See SNL, pp. 96-7. Similarly, as Eric Springsted suggests, Weil interprets Plato's thinking non-dualistically, though in this thesis, this does not imply that Weil also holds to this way of thinking. See Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*, p. 149. For a good discussion on Plato's Theory of the Forms, see Alexander Nehamas, *Virtues and Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 176-195.

[29] Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* pp. 70-1. For further readings on Plato's understanding of God, see also C. Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 14-40; G. Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God* (Dublin: The Columbia Press, 1994), pp. 18-30.

human and the divine. What I mean by this dualism is her explicit inclination to allow her conceptual and experiential notions of the supernatural to be entirely alienated and separated from the events and affairs of this world in order to sustain their perfection and purity. In the latter stages of her life and work she 'fixes her attention upon the heavens alone and never again looks back toward the city'.[30] This will be shown to appear not only through her theorizing but equally and, perhaps more importantly, through her living. The main aim is to sustain the position that Weil rejects the power and oppression of modern, urban society ('the city') for the safe-haven of her divine reality ('the heavens'), which, in her religious writings, she identifies this power in the Roman Catholic Church and her refusal to take baptism.[31] Her move away from the 'city' politically, socially, and spiritually was her attempt to reconfigure the relationship between the supernatural and natural world in which the former dominates over and governs the latter. This issue will need further justification particularly when specific concepts, such as her notion of 'contradiction', which I introduce shortly, may potentially threaten this dualistic approach. Nevertheless, the ramifications of her understanding of the human-divine relationship have profound consequences for her understanding of the human condition, and the purpose of this condition in relation to the genesis of the search for salvation.

The reasons that an attempt is made to consider whether Weil is a dualist or a non-dualist, or perhaps both, concerns the effectiveness with which her ideas can, from a practical viewpoint, integrate fully into the stream of human life. This assessment arises as a result of a comment that she once wrote in a letter to a friend, the Catholic Priest, Father Perrin. In it, she insisted upon the separation of her personhood from her ideas, arguing, as Simone Petrément once remarked, that the thoughts residing within her were far worthier than her personal life.[32] In other words, Weil wanted her ideas to be

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[30] See BHD, p. 111.

[31] One of several examples that typify this position is Weil's difficulty in later life to clarity her position in relation to the Roman Catholic Church. Her hesitation and reluctance to submit to baptism, and her deep reservations about joining a Church with a history, as she puts it, of 'the most appalling cruelties', support the idea that Weil was inclined towards exile in her supernatural world rather than to attempt to prevail over the ambiguity and ambivalence of the city, see Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, trans. A. F. Wills (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 31-33. Hereafter, cited as LTAP.

[32] See Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Mowbrays, 1976), p. 1. Hereafter, cited as P.

examined without intrusions into her inner reality. Where I explore the implications of this belief throughout 'part II', what is rather interesting to note is how this division between thought and experience corresponds to various commentaries on Weil's work that have either focused exclusively on her theological, Christian ideas – what Gertrude Blumenthal has called her 'way of the Cross'[33] – or her political and social ideas associated with an essay she wrote in 1934 entitled 'Reflections Concerning the Causes of Oppression and Liberty in Society'.[34] Few commentaries have been fully concerned to examine the tension within the juxtaposition of her ideas and experiences from which her basic philosophical preoccupation resides.[35] I am by no means attempting to criticize these scholarly contributions, but merely observe how many commentaries, unconsciously appear to have taken Weil's request to focus solely on her ideas too literally, and forget the framework and context in which these ideas emerged. Where either approach is reasonable given, in retrospect, that Weil's conceptual approach to the world changed decisively from a socio-political concern to a far more mystical and religious perspective after her conversion experience of 1938,[36] there are a number of commentaries that have in fact reminded the reader of Weil's initial philosophical

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[33] Gerda Blumenthal, 'Simone Weil's Way of the Cross', pp. 230-1. Commentaries that focus solely on Weil's theological ideas were something that the philosopher and Priest, Gustave Thibon, insisted upon in his introduction to *La pesanteur et la Grâce*. He argued that Weil's works must be considered as the writings of a mystic rather than that of a philosopher. See Gustave Thibon, 'Introduction' *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 1952), pp.vii-xxxvii. Hereafter, cited as GG. For commentaries that exclusively address Weil's theology, see J. A. Bramley, 'A Pilgrim of the Absolute', *Hibbert Journal* 66 (1967), 10-14; Georges Frenaud, 'Simone Weil's Religious Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology', *Theological Studies* 14 (1953), 349-76; Elizabeth Jennings, 'A World of Contradictions', *The Month* 22 (1959), 349-58; J. P. Little, 'The Symbolism of the Cross in the Writings of Simone Weil', *Religious Studies* 6 (1970), 177-82; Miklos Vetö, 'Simone Weil and Suffering', *Thought* 40 (1965), 275-86.

[34] See J. H. King, 'Simone Weil and the Identity of France', *Journal of European Studies* 6 (1976), 125-43; Roy Pierce, 'Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil', *Political Science Quarterly* 77 (1962), 505-25; Fred Rosen, 'Labour and Liberty: Simone Weil and the Human Condition', *Theoria and Theory* 7, (1973), 33-47.

[35] 'Simone Weil was so closely tied to a strong dialectical bent of mind and the need to conceptualise experience that it would seem of the greatest importance [...] to try to understand their relation. See Blumenthal, 'Simone Weil's Way of the Cross', p. 225.

[36] There were several mystical experiences in Weil's life between 1937-8, which Weil records to Father Perrin in 1942, but her conversation experience in 1938 was the summit of what she describes as Christ taking possession of her. In a state of absolute physical and emotional pain, she visited Solesmes with her mother to attend an Easter service where a combination of Gregorian music and her later recitation of the 17th century metaphysical poet, George Herbert's poem 'love', brought her to an experience of the love of Christ. I will cover this period in Weil's life as a way of bringing to discussion Weil's religious writings. For further details, see Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), pp. 64ff. Hereafter, cited as WFG.

vocation to establish a commensurable relation between the immaterial and material realities. The question that part II attempts to answer is whether or not she was successful in this attempt.

What is also of further deliberation through Weil's intent to separate out thought from experience is her association with the movement of Gnostic thought. Where further reasons to explore her affiliation with the Gnostics will be clarified later on, at this stage, her intention to separate her thinking from her living is something that perhaps goes some way towards illustrating her affections for the Gnostic movement. As mentioned earlier, Gnosticism is an ancient, complex, spiritual movement of 'Christian' thought that the early orthodox Church denounced as heretical because of its dualistic claim that the material world is not only inherently evil but that it was created by an alien god.[37] What is worth noting at this stage is how Weil and Gnosticism hold a deep reservation towards institutional religion, commenting on its religious exclusivity and its failings to qualify the divinity that resides within all human beings.[38] For example, the Gnostics, as Pagels puts it, teach that every initiate has direct access to God of which priests and bishops are not only unnecessary, but are even ignorant of that fact.[39] Within each human being, for Gnosticism and indeed Simone Weil, there resides a spark of the divine that is thoroughly distinct from the soul and that enables a human being to return to the divine.[40]

While further connections are reserved for later, what is relevant here, however, is that her interest in this movement came from her reading of two articles between 1940-1 by Déodat Roché on Catharism – a form of Christian Gnosticism that was widespread

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[37] See Giovanna Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock, pp. 3-5, 153-172; P. Perkins, 'Irenaeus and the Gnostics', *Vigiliae Christianae* 30 (1976), 193-200; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, pp. 71-87.

[38] For Weil's reservations against the Roman Catholic Church, see LTAP, pp. 1ff. See also Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock, pp. 27-33.

[39] Elaine Pagels, p. 54. See also, E. Leach, 'Melchisedek and the Emperor: Icons of subversion and orthodoxy', in E. Leach and D.A. Aycock, eds. *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 67–88.

[40] Weil argues that the soul is divided into two parts – the natural, 'created part', and the smaller, 'supernatural part'. The 'uncreated', supernatural part of the human being is 'the Life, the Light, the Word', see Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Rush Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 103. Hereafter, cited as FLN. See also, J. P. Little, 'Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation' in Richard R. Bell, *Philosophy of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-16 (pp. 6-7). On Gnosticism, see J. Zandee, 'Gnostic ideas on fall and salvation', *Numen* 11 (1964), 19-68.

during the eleventh and twelfth century.[41] Weil found that Christianity issued from the same 'stream of thought' as Pythagoreanism as well as 'the mysteries and initiatory sects of Egypt, Thrace, Greece, and Persia'.[42] The Pythagoreans were both a religious and philosophical community that, in principle, corresponds to the foundations of Catharism on the purification and salvation of the soul, not by means of religious ritual but through an exercise of thought and the study of worldly relations that aim to bring forward the spiritual life of human beings.[43] Weil goes so far as to suggest that the Gnostics and Cathars were more faithful to it than Christianity.[44]

Where Weil's sympathy towards these individuals will become increasingly clear through an exploration of her own theology, her passion towards the Cathars nevertheless has often been dressed down in several commentaries. The broader objective in these discussions is that Weil's theology does not appear to be commensurable with the dualism of Gnostic thought.[45] Not only do I attempt to re-evaluate this claim by addressing the affinity between Weil and the Cathars, but forthcoming discussions aim to assess a deeper soteriological perspective on gnosis that not only puts a non-dualistic emphasis on Gnostic thinking, but aims to illuminate some of the dualistic concerns associated with Weil's religious, social and political writings. What Part II aims to address is whether, as Gillian Rose once remarked on her essay that compared Weil with the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, her struggle to find a sense of equanimity between the human and the divine is inherently based on a failure to embody her own supernatural nature,[46] i.e. her own inability to appropriately integrate her understanding of the supernatural into the heart of her life and experiences. The final sections of chapter IV endeavour to bring some illumination to these issues.

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[41] Catharism was a form of Christian Gnosticism that was widespread in the eleventh and twelfth century, which allowed for worldly renunciation in the form of suicidal starvation.

[42] SL, pp. 129-130.

[43] See IC, pp. 151ff. The works of Plato, Weil considered, to be the 'most perfect written expression which we possess of that thought'. SL, p. 130. Her affiliation with the Cathars, nevertheless, is not simply to do with the Pythagoreans, but also to do with their rejection of the Old Testament and the incommensurability between the God of the Old and the God of the New Testament. See SL, pp. 129-130.

[44] See ibid., pp. 129-131.

[45] Lois Dupré, 'Simone Weil and Platonism: An Introductory Reading' in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, eds. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2004), 9-22 (pp. 20-21).

[46] JM, p. 221.

Where Weil's thought then is potentially structured in terms of a turning away from the 'city', Gillian Rose brings a slightly different response to her relationship with the world. Initially, however, there is a similarity between their thoughts on the divine. Like Weil, Rose holds to the transcendence of a divine reality both intellectually and personally. She fixes her attention on the dramatic oscillations of heaven and earth where she is constantly and tirelessly leaving from and returning to the 'city'. Rose takes a strong dialectic approach to the nature of divine reality. That is to say, she holds both to the transcendence and immanence of God in relation to the physical world. Where Weil's thoughts are understood in terms of directing the human being away from the world towards the supernatural, the structure of Rose's intellectual vocation is to establish a sense of rootedness, through her theological, political and sociological preoccupations, in the tension between the heavens and the city, between heaven and earth. The intention, therefore, is to show that Rose is more inclined to remain in attention to the tension and conflict between the human and divine worlds, rather than work the limitlessness of one world against the shortfalls of the other.

By taking this approach, she will be less inclined to place a sense of finality and closure not just upon these worlds, but also upon the chasm that exists between them. As Nigel Tubbs comments, Gillian Rose is willing to 'mind the gap', by which he means, 'guarding the gap against those who would close it by forcing their own resolution'.[47] In order to investigate in further detail Rose's workings, we need, like with Weil, to continue further with her understanding of God, particularly in relation to human beings in the world.

Unlike Weil's struggle to find membership within the Church,[48] Rose converted to the Anglican tradition in the last remaining hours of her life. With a willingness to fuse her private world with public life, that is to say, to juxtapose the inner-workings of her reality with the wrenching demands of the city, the collective, the conclusion of her life can only echo the affirmation of her obituary: 'she died reconciled to her family, to God and to her own cruel fate'.[49] In spite of her conversion, Rose was first and foremost a Hegelian philosopher as well as a social and political thinker. Like the German

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[47] N. Tubbs, 'Mind the Gap: The Philosophy of Gillian Rose' in *Thesis Eleven* 60 (2000), 42-60 (pp. 56-7).
[48] See LTAP.
[49] M. Jay, 'The Conversion of the Rose', *Force Fields: Salmagundi* (1997), 41-52 (p. 41).

philosopher, Hegel, she argued for 'thinking the Absolute or Transcendent' as ultimately realized by the individual in the ethical life of a community. That is to say, both assert the development of thought to the fullness of divinity rather than a climb to the divine by means of a flight from the contingent world.[50] The nature of this way of thinking will depend upon a development of their systems of thought, which I will introduce shortly.

The consequence of escaping from absolute thought generates a rift between the thinker who goes into exile from the world and the individual who has to live in it. What is proposed here is that the realities of modern, urban life and the inner-spiritual, supernatural life are not two realities as such, but in fact, two aspects of one reality which are interrelated in the one life of a human being. The one life enables the absolute to be thought because the 'idea which a man has of God corresponds with that which he has of himself, of his freedom'.[51] This quote by Hegel opens the gateway to what is known as Hegelian speculative thought. Generally speaking, this type of thinking, for Rose, enables both an idea (or a concept) in itself and the reality of that idea to coexist on equal terms with one another. In other words, speculative thinking, for example, seeks to grasp the divine reality *in* the contingent world given that any thought about the divine takes place within this world. In this way, her use of Hegel's philosophical methodology here enables her to fuse the private (spiritual) and the public (physical). The physical and spiritual realities are able to integrate as a single life in which the divine is transcendent and 'other', but at the same, equally and inwardly indivisible from the human being.

This relationship establishes a non-dualistic framework in this thesis, which incidentally, will be used to explore, at a later stage, Rose's own affiliation with Gnostic thought towards the end of her life. In order to 'climb' to divinity, Rose does not fly

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[50] This phrase comes from Hegel's 'flight from the finite', which Rose discusses in relation to Hegel's critique of the German Philosopher's, Kant and Fichte, and their conception of the freedom of the individual in relation to God. Hegel, according to Rose, attacks both their philosophies of individual freedom as freedom from the contingent world, which implies that the rigid divisions in their systems between the 'sensuous' and 'supersensuous world' prevent the understanding of either. Instead, we are left, says Rose, with a disconnected finite realm and an infinite reality that is debased because it has no real characterization. What determines the nature of Rose and Hegel's position here requires a development of their system of thought in this thesis, see HCS, 97-8; G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte and Schelling's System of Philosophy,* trans. H. S. Harris and W. Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 58.

[51] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,* Vol. 1, trans. E. B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 79

from, but stays with, and within modern society.[52] This point illustrates the crucial difference between both women and their predecessors. As a contrast to Weil's thinking, Rose proposes that the nature of the infinite includes the finite reality. In short, Rose and Hegel are happy to 'unite the "knowledge of God" with the "wisdom of the world" and indeed, with the world itself'.[53] Here, the duality of divinity is transformed towards a non-duality between God and creation.[54] This proposal of using a dualistic and non-dualistic framework to assess Weil and Rose's writings on the human-divine relationship will appear in Part II and III respectively in order further to address their implications in the context of the genesis of the search for salvation.

In spite of the fact that both women are considered from different angles on the relationship between the human and the divine, one must not immediately conclude that Weil, for example, is spiritually and rationally inferior to Rose. As this thesis attempts to demonstrate, both women are equally active in their lives. They both work with similar definitions of the human condition. Yet, as I have suggested, the issue between the two of them is to understand which approach to the human condition, or even both, is self-transforming in the light of our inquiry into the genesis of the search for salvation. Now that their perceptions of the human-divine relationship have been introduced, it is important to move forward into addressing key ideas and concepts that drive the reality and purpose of their assessments of the human condition.

1.4.2: The Nature and Reality of Contradiction

It is evident that for Weil and particularly Rose, one cannot talk about knowledge without personal change. The fundamental tenets of both women are intended to express the element of practice or action, which tests the worthiness of their intellectual claims. What, therefore, are their key conceptual claims that support our investigations?

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[52] See, for example, Ann Parry, 'Rejecting the "ineffability" of the Holocaust: the work of Gillian Rose and Anne Michaels', *Journal of European Studies* 30 (2000), 353-368.
[53] HCS, pp. 92ff.
[54] In Hegel's essays, *The Life of Jesus* and *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Destiny*, he argues for a transformation of Christianity and the recognition that the divine is always within life and within the social world which orthodox Christianity neglects. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Three Essays, 1793-1795: The Tubingen Essay, Berne Fragments, the Life of Jesus*, trans. Peter Fuss and John Dobbins (Notre Dame: University Of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 1ff.

If we recall, the juxtaposition of the 'other reality' with this world is intended to evoke tension, difficulty and struggle. Both women identify this conflicting juxtaposition through their intellectual and personal preoccupations. In many ways, the nature of this conflict brings to mind, for example, the issues associated with the 'problem of evil' – the contradiction between a created world that contains evil and an omnipotent, omniscient, creator God who is wholly good.[55] No attempt here is made to tackle the problem, but there is the *thinking* of the problem itself that points to a deeper understanding of what contradiction means for Simone Weil and Gillian Rose. The term contradiction or paradox is used to represent this tension and difficulty, which the 'problem of evil' highlights. Not only does the 'problem of evil' illustrate the oppositional or incommensurable terms in connection with the problematic of our 'two-worlds' theory,[56] but equally exposes the incompatibility between the visible and invisible, the finite and infinite.

For Weil and Rose, the term contradiction refers to nothing more than a problem, and emerges as an 'opposition between perceptions, thoughts, ideas or the predication of terms that we need to solve in order to contemplate their truth'.[57] It can be an indication of having met reality. As Weil puts it, 'reality is what method does not allow us to foresee'. Noting the opposition of 'contradiction', both women recognize that our mental projections of the world and the way the world goes along on its own accord, addresses the point that contradiction can show just how much more of the world we need to take into account. In addition, it might provide us with a 'gateway to a fuller encounter of reality'.[58] This fullness, Weil expresses as 'mystery', which becomes another mode for defining contradiction. In order to make the connection between 'mystery' and 'contradiction', she points out that the oppositional terms in contradiction need to be

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[55] See for example, J. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1991); R. Swinburne, *Is there a God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); B. Mitchell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); H. J. McCloskey, *God and Evil* (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); R. D. Geivett, *Evil and the Providence of God: The Challenge of John Hick's Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

[56] Rose uses this term quite frequently in her work to cover discussions that are associated with the relation of the transcendent world to the physical world and vice versa.

[57] E. O. Springsted, 'Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words', *Religion and Literature* 17 (1985), 1-16, (pp. 2-3).

[58] GG, p. 35.

linked together though without our ability to comprehend the unity within which the terms of the contradiction exist.[59]

If we briefly return to the 'problem of evil', we find that Weil's understanding of contradiction in relation to it enables us to validate and enrich both the world in which evil exists (visible) and the world of an omnipotent, wholly good God (invisible). She chooses not to resolve the problem, but rather, accept the truth of God's goodness and the existence of evil. She seeks to establish an understanding of God's love that will enable us to understand the nature of suffering and how this suffering can illuminate our understanding of God's goodness. In this way, Weil wants to demonstrate that even though the existence of two incompatible terms appears to be in contradiction, their unity is anticipated to bring understanding of the relationship between this world and the divine. This, as I suggested in the previous section, might contravene our claim that her thinking is dualistic and therefore problematic. Nevertheless, our concern is upheld when Weil talks particularly about a similar sort of unity with regards to contradiction: to discover the unity of two incompatible terms on a 'higher plane' than the one in which the two terms are held in contradiction.[60] The difference that appears between Weil and Rose can be clearly illustrated on their respective uses of contradiction: Weil aims to resolve it, whereas Rose, being true to Hegel, argues in principle that any resolution to contradiction fails to recognise further contradiction in what appears to be considered the 'unity' of contradiction.[61]

Though contradiction as mystery has pointed to an ultimate unity of all things in God whereby such unity transcends our thoughts, the question that we face in the light of Weil's discovery is whether this transcendence becomes a living reality for both women, particularly Weil? This world has to be a mystery otherwise we fail to recognize the equality and coexistence of two incompatible terms in contradiction. For Rose, contradiction holds a similar meaning, which is highlighted by Weil's methodology towards the 'problem of evil'.[62] Without wanting to resolve contradiction though, Rose

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[59] See FLN, p. 181.
[60] Simone Weil, *An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), p. 242. Hereafter, cited as MILES.
[61] See David H. Kelsey, 'Human Being', *Christian Theology*, eds. Peter Hodgson and Robert King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982), 141-167, (pp. 159-61).
[62] See footnote 55.

draws upon the practical learning and experience of accepting both incompatible terms, and recognizing the ambivalence and uncertainty of our identity through contradiction. Rose, in contrast to Weil, would be unwilling though to talk about higher planes of unity. She would most probably be reluctant to legitimize Weil's 'hidden unity' of incommensurate terms in spite of the fact that we will not be able to comprehend it. This is why emphasizing and sticking to the mystery of contradiction is so important.

An exploration of this term leads onto definitions and explanations associated with more specific concepts in the writings of Weil and Rose. Overall, their key ideas and concepts will take priority in Parts II and III respectively. The issues and implications of the human-divine relationship introduced earlier will be analysed and explored as a result of an initial development of these key conceptual terms and ideas associated with both women. This advance will help to assess the commensurability between their use of contradiction and the coherency of their ideas and beliefs. In other words, there is an important consideration to the implications of contradiction in respect of Weil and Rose's intellectual and personal preoccupations with the human-divine relationship. Alternatively stated, an assessment of their use of contradiction will help to address whether both women live with paradoxes, and therefore, accept the consequences of an on-going reality of uncertainty. Or, as it seems to be the case with Weil, whether contradiction appears to be resolved from the viewpoint that a transcended unity is established from two incommensurate terms.[63]

1.4.3: Weil – 'The Void'; Rose – 'The Broken Middle'

From our assessment of Weil and Rose so far, contradiction alludes to a 'hidden unity' of the human-divine relationship that we are not expected to comprehend and resolve. With Weil, at this stage, we suspect otherwise. What enables us to surmise Weil's approach to contradiction is her notion of the 'void'. The void is a metaphor of darkness and nothingness, and the human condition resists this nothingness by veiling it with false consolations, illusions, comforts and attachments. To be in the void then is to be in the

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[63] See FLN, p. 160.

grip of the death of the ego and attention to the hiddeness of the divine.[64] As an empty space of nothingness, the void, for Weil, is at the threshold between the world of appearances and the divine world.[65] She uses it to draw out the contradiction of human beings as subjects of experience. In other words, Weil's attention to the contradiction of the human being is interconnected with what she considers to be, for example, the contradiction of creation: the act of creation by God is an act of abdication according to Weil. Creation, says Weil, is a contradiction because 'God who is infinite, who is all [...] should do something that is outside of himself, that is not himself'. In that case, God is absent even from his own creation. Through this absence, the void is created so that one might have a need for God.[66] Like Pascal, Weil envisages God as the Totally Other.[67] In that case, according to Weil, the result of this particular idea of a much broader assessment of the human-divine relationship means that her void represents a particular *type* of contradiction.

This view of the remote transcendence of God means that we need to understand how divine reality for Weil is able to connect with and participate in the physical world.[68] Moreover, the implication of this view re-emphasizes my earlier concerns over the claim that her metaphysics is potentially dualistic. Therefore, our investigations into her concept of the void, in addition to her understanding and use of contradiction, will help to address these concerns.

The difficulty that appears here with Weil is her reluctance to accept and embrace the mystery of contradiction, and work with the understanding that unfolds from it in the light of the void. There is a much bigger issue at hand with the void, namely, the eternal

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[64] The void aims to critique and deconstruct worldly idols in order for human beings to give attention to the hiddenness of God. Alternatively put, Weil's intention is to deconstruct worldly idolatries that divert our attention from the nature of God, and therefore, the reality of our human condition that is subject, according to Weil, to 'infinite separation'. See A. Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 45-7. See also Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1956), p. 424. Hereafter, cited as N.

[65] The void, says Weil, arises 'when there is nothing external to correspond to an internal tension', see N, p. 147. See also FLN, p. 159.

[66] GG, pp. 10-11.

[67] See Blaise Pascal, *The Provincial Letters,* trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1967).

[68] The aim is to show that Weil does attempt to take Christianity as a universal core of mystical truth and relate it to secular life, but the question that is addressed is how effective is this relation between Christian truth and secular reality in her religious writings. For an example on the relation between Weil's religious language and secular thought, see Peter Winch, *The Just Balance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.

and fundamental imperfection of the human being. Weil goes to great lengths to emphasize this not only through her intellectual preoccupations, but equally through her own sense (or lack) of self-identity. Investigations in these areas will add to the reality of her metaphysics and the corresponding implications for the genesis of the search for salvation. This thesis, therefore, begins by exploring the ways in which her use of contradiction and the 'void' are inherent throughout her ideas and beliefs, and more importantly, how they inter-relate within her own existential, spiritual vocation and sense of personal identity.

The evidence of this interrelation will emerge not only with this separation that Weil perceives between God and creation, but her sense of identity with the Gnostics and their dualistic worldview.[69] I bring in a more elaborate discussion on Gnosticism in order to address the issues concerning Weil's notion of the void and contradiction, but also its understanding of the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. In a similar way to Weil, Gnosticism evaluates the visible world together with its creator in unequivocally negative terms. The visible world is regarded as evil and dark, whilst the otherworldly and Unknown God is the Real, the Infinite, all-encompassing divine being. In respect of the possibility that Weil's metaphysics is dualistic, Gnosticism has been regarded as equally dualistic, but the step taken is to consider that Gnostic thought may in fact be non-dualistic given their view of the universe as an undivided and indivisible whole.[70]

In this discussion, the otherworldliness of the divine in neo-gnosticism is not taken in terms of location or space, but in terms of understanding beyond the range of ignorance and ego toward the limitless. So, the themes taken from Gnostic thought are the divisions within the indivisible, that is to say, the 'One', (the invisible) dividing into

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[69] This is particularly evident with her interest in the Cathars, and their views on spiritual cleansing as a process of material detachment. See MILES, pp. 20-21, 162.

[70] Petrément, for example, argues in her writings on Gnosticism that its dualistic thinking was not intended to be taken literally, but rather to serve what they considered to be the most appropriate model in which to affirm the transcendence of God. In which case, she concludes, therefore, that this dualism in as much as any dualism cannot be perfectly balanced for there is 'no equality or perfect analogy between realities of different levels' in as much as the 'perfect system' that will fully elucidate the transcendence of divine reality. In that case, as forthcoming discussions will attempt to elucidate, Gnostic thought uses the 'dualistic situation' as distinctions within humanity and not ultimately speaking distinctions between human beings and human beings and the divine. See Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, trans. Carol Harrison (London: Darton, 1984), pp. 179-80.

multiple realities when it enters the world of form and matter. Can we take this Gnostic example to deepen and perhaps resolve Weil's metaphysical difficulties? We leave this for now because a discussion considering the possibility of a non-dualistic metaphysics in neo-gnosticism acts as a preliminary introduction to Part III on Gillian Rose.

Gnostic thought is addressed in this thesis in the light of personal experience and reflection, which will indeed carry some significance with theological and philosophical themes addressed in Rose's life and work. Even she herself acknowledges that 'Gnosticism is our normal spiritual condition'.[71] In a rather different manner to Weil, Rose uses contradiction to experience the sensation as she puts it of the 'unreal, ecstatic and unworldly' reality, but where this experience appears to put Weil into exile from the world, for Rose, it returns her to 'the vocation of the everyday'.[72] Rose is less inclined to talk about higher realms of truth and unity or incomprehensible links between two incommensurates that are in contradiction. Rather, she is very Hegelian in her thinking. Following Hegel's dialectical method, any principle or statement of truth is determined in and through the relation of this statement or principle of truth to its antithesis.[73] This is primarily the foundation and source of her philosophical idea – 'the broken middle'. Generally speaking, the broken middle is dialectical. Like the void, the broken middle is a *type* of contradiction, that is, a contradiction of ideas that serves as the determining factor in their interaction, and aims to identify the relevance of the integrity and brokenness of the whole life.[74]

In order to explain what is meant by this, one has initially to understand the notion of the 'middle' itself. Rose would say that a 'middle' is an indeterminate universal, that is to say, it has nothing lying outside of itself that would help to define its existence. For example, Weil's idea of God would be considered an indeterminate universal – unknown and self-sufficient. What makes this 'middle' a broken middle is when Weil's idea of God is recognised in relation to its antithesis. In other words, the determination of the metaphysical context of God is established by taking into account the way in which God

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[71] PA, p. 24.
[72] Ibid., p. 21.
[73] See, for example, David H. Kelsey, 'Human Being', *Christian Theology*, pp. 159-60. See also, G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 99. Hereafter, cited as POS.
[74] PA, p. 23.

is recognized through physical reality, which incidentally, will not necessarily correspond to metaphysical reality. According to Rose's broken middle, the dialectical relationship between this metaphysical and non-metaphysical view of God is the determining factor in identifying the real reality of God.

Thus, the term, 'broken middle', is a philosophical expression that comes closest to Weil's definition of contradiction as mystery, that is, incommensurable terms connected dialectically, but without necessarily having to represent some incomprehensible, higher unity. Rather the sense of unity and mystery of contradiction is comprehended through the living of the dialectic. Without being able to comprehend the unity between two incommensurable terms, Rose's 'broken middle' illustrates the crisis of difference, conflict and opposition as contradiction. This crisis manifests itself not only in the relation between the 'I' and the 'Other' in oneself, (as one's own contradictory self-relation), but also in another person or thing. Thus, the broken middle is not only associated with the 'crisis' of the world of a human being, but equally the 'crisis' in collective institutions, social relations and social/political systems. In short, the broken middle, like Weil's void, brings the soul into an experience of nakedness and introspection.

Finally, there will be further consideration as to what sort of intellectual claims Rose is willing to make in relation to her broken middle. There is always an identification of the differentiation and crisis through the broken middle, but one wonders whether a taste of Weil's willingness to concede to a higher realm of unity might go a long way to establish a peaceful or loving way of coexisting in and amongst the ambiguity of predicaments and paradoxes. Several of Rose's philosophical assessments highlight an on-going critical approach towards social, political and theological tenets that attempt to resolve contradiction.[75] The suggestion through various inquiries into Rose's work is whether she might have shown a deeper resolve to these resolutions whilst simultaneously maintaining their obvious predicament; the aim, of course, is to release the human being from material bondage. In which case, even if the broken middle might enable us to accept and live with the ambiguities of contradiction, does it provide a

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[75] See, for example, Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 247-95. Hereafter, cited as TBM.

human being with the possibility of self-transformation? Do we begin to change the way in which we relate to contradiction? These issues will be explored by contrasting Rose's thoughts with several themes connected to Weil's political and social writings.

1.5 *The Genesis of the Search for Salvation*

These conceptual terms and ideas in both women come to ahead in Part IV with the genesis of the search for salvation. For Weil and Rose, the aim is to demonstrate how the nature of contradiction brings forward experiences of uncertainty and perplexity that not only make us uncomfortable, but provide a platform for personal change. Such situations ask us willingly to face what we resist the most in our lived experiences. Considering the intellectual preoccupations of both women along the lines of their primary philosophical traditions will help to illustrate precisely the areas in which these characteristics of contradiction unfold in their life and work, and how their conceptual use of contradiction leans towards a practical diagnosis. The way both women approach contradiction from different perspectives will assist with the investigation, and enable us to discern the indispensable metamorphosis of their and our sense of self.[76]

In the meantime, it is important to recognize, firstly, that the spiritual capacities of contradiction for salvation depend upon the importance of action rather than just thought alone in our living experiences. In this way, one begins to recognize, secondly, that the context of contradiction requires much more than just a conceptual analysis. Weil and Rose, through the 'void' and 'broken middle' respectively, wish to demonstrate the spirituality of their ideas by illustrating that these conceptual terms expose the contradiction of and within the *whole* human being. By bringing forward contradiction in this way, this final section of the thesis will attempt to demonstrate whether or not both women do explore the arbitrariness and lifelessness of resolutions. In doing so, this final part of the thesis will aim to draw the conclusion that the genesis of the search for

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[76] The French Philosopher, Pierre Hadot, also talks about the use of philosophy as a kind of spiritual exercise, and how it serves to completely reverse our usual ways of looking at things. The consequence of this is that we switch from a 'passion dependent' to a 'passion independent' vision of reality that brings about an inner, spiritual transformation. See P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 81.

salvation is the interplay and ultimate indivisibility between the human and the divine.[77] A life of contradiction then is not just about good ideas and grand narratives as one may appear to suspect particularly with Weil and to a lesser degree with Rose, but also about the way in which thoughts and ideas (in contradiction) translate into action. With thought tied to action, we discern the *spirituality* of contradiction as an essential quality of life and meaning for a human being.

Within this existential ethos, individual qualities such as attention to and concentration on the present moment[78] are crucial. They facilitate the understanding of what it is to live with, through and in contradiction as the genesis of the search for salvation. More than ever we begin to see already and with forthcoming discussions, how contradiction impacts so powerfully upon the *whole* of a person – his or her spiritual, emotional, physical and mental orientation.[79]

In short, the structure of this thesis will work to evaluate and develop the writings of Simone Weil and Gillian Rose. Following on from this part, Parts II and III will focus on Weil and Rose respectively. Part II begins by highlighting themes and tenets to be discussed and investigated in relation to Weil, followed by several detailed investigations into her use of contradiction and the void and their implications through her life and work. Part III follows a similar format with Gillian Rose and her broken middle. The final section, Part IV, explores both existential thinkers together through the genesis of the search for salvation.

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[77] This conclusion will also consist of a revision of several neo-gnostic themes that will be addressed earlier in relation to Weil's and Rose's understanding of the human-divine relationship.
[78] See ibid., 268.
[79] For comments on 'attention' with reference to the present moment, see GG, p. 89, 106; HCS, p. 81.

PART II

Prelude: 'Simone Weil and the Void'

The previous chapter outlined the areas of investigation with regards to Weil's and Rose's assessment of the human condition. Briefly, this condition refers to the conflict and tension of human life, which their intellectual and practical standpoints represent through their respective uses of the notion of 'contradiction'. The use of this notion by both women is comprehensive. Firstly, chapter I attempted to draw out the way in which contradiction, overall, is valuable to them impersonally and personally. That is to say, by engaging in the struggle that arises from contradiction in the intellectual and practical affairs of this world, Weil and Rose are able to address the nature and significance of the human condition. This raises the second point that for both women, the human condition not only alludes to the struggle of the reality of two separate but interactive worlds – the human and divine – but also highlights that human existence itself is meaningful.

This broader use of contradiction requires a specific exploration into the nature and structure of their respective thoughts, which as I have already mentioned, establishes a basis in which to explore very precise areas of their intellectual and personal vocation. Although the overall investigation is comprised of four parts, there are two fundamental areas of inquiry that ultimately determine the comprehensiveness of contradiction. The first area assesses Weil's and Rose's comprehension of the human condition through their respective social, political and religious writings. In the course of these assessments, their specific conceptual tenets – the 'void' (Weil) and the 'broken middle' (Rose) – are particular *types* of contradict ion that, firstly, attempt to bring the human being into a direct awareness of their reality, i.e. their human condition, and secondly, to focus that awareness towards personal change and self-transformation. In that case, forthcoming investigations will inevitably have to consider their personal experiences as a further development of their intellectual vocation. The second area of assessment, Part IV, juxtaposes their respective experiences and intellectual considerations of the human condition in order to address the genesis of the search for salvation, i.e. how conflicting events in human life require negotiation in order to give rise to an inner transformation of

the individual in this world, but in relation to the divine. To be properly attentive then to the vocation of both women, one has to recognize that both offer not just theories, for example, about truth and justice but offer suggestions of how human beings are to live their lives in truth and with justice. Ultimately, for both Weil and Rose truth must be lived.[1] Any investigation, therefore, requires the unity of their ideas and lives in order to assess the potential of that unity to effectively change the human approach to being-in-the-world.[2] For now, the aim is to focus exclusively on Weil, followed by Rose in Part III in order to do justice to the intricacies of their intellectual and experiential vocations.

Broadly speaking, Part II of this thesis attempts to investigate the issues addressed in the previous chapter, concerning whether or not Weil successfully develops her metaphysical ideas in a way that illuminates and transforms physical reality. Typically, Weil's entire intellectual enterprise is about approaching a problem in the world both from the viewpoint of human experience and from the viewpoint of the infinite.[3] When these two points of view are brought into relation, Weil explores their contradictions. In that sense, her intellectual outlook is geared to working with paradoxical relations, becoming what one commentator has suggested, 'obsessed with the negative reality of paradoxes'[4] by seeking out 'darkness and oblivion in the anonymous lives of factory workers and peasants, in the rejection of material pleasure [...] and of material necessities'.[5] But Weil's identification with human suffering through the dialectical structure of her thinking was not intended to leave the individual in that condition.

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[1] The French philosopher, Pierre Hadot, gives an account of Socrates' dialogue concerning the meaning of justice. Failing to actually define what justice really is, Socrates simply remarks: 'If I don't reveal my views on justice in words, I do so by my conduct'. In short, 'justice cannot be defined in an absolute manner; it must be lived'. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson, p. 155. See also Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutierrez*, p. 1.

[2] Several studies in philosophy have become interested in the nature of a thinker's life rather than simply the content of their ideas. More importantly, they have been at pains to emphasise the importance of practicing philosophy in human affairs. See, for example, H. Keyserling, *The Art of Life* (Plymouth: The Mayflower Press, 1937); Alexander Nehamas, *the Art of Living* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000); Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson. This philosophical approach in relation to Weil, see Gerda Blumenthal 'Simone Weil's Way of the Cross', 225-234. For Rose, 'we need to venture again the courage of suspense, not knowing who we are, in order to rediscover our infinite capacity for self-creation and response to our fellow self-creators'. See PA, p. 63.

[3] On this point, the Weil scholar, Dorothy McFarland remarks that she 'approaches a problem both from the vantage point of human experience in the world and from the point of view of eternity, and then explores the contradictions that result'. Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 8.

[4] J. Mark, 'Simone Weil: A Christian in Exile', *Prism* (1994), 9-18 (p. 16).

[5] E. Jennings, 'A World of Contradictions: A Study of Simone Weil', p. 353.

Rather, initial investigations into her early adolescent crisis will show that she came to recognize through human misfortune the universal accessibility and attainment of truth for all human beings. This tension she once recorded in a series of letters from 1937-1942 as the conflict between 'raising the individual' and the individual 'struggling free from bondage'.[6] Weil is at pains to expose this conflict in order to explore the resulting contradictions, but what is particularly unusual from the perspective of her late religious writings is that contradiction acts as a lever in which to take a given problem and raise it to a higher level of understanding that expands a person's perception of reality.[7]

With her affair with contradiction, Weil displayed a degree of intolerability towards social and religious institutions because of their unwillingness to recognize the tension and uncertainties of their absolute truth claims.[8] As McFarland once remarked, Weil's 'method of thinking is altogether at odds with the kind of thinking that accepts or supports orthodoxies, and this accounts at least in part for her difficulties with the orthodoxies of the [...] Catholic Church'.[9] Precisely, what she relentlessly argues against in relation to social structures is their inability to foster the negation of their own truth claims, which in turn would enable the human being to engage with and be part of its own experience of the world. Commenting on the importance of this relation between the individual and the external world, Weil argues that

> if you want not to construct a theory, but to ascertain the condition in which man is actually placed, you will not ask yourself how it happens that the world is known, but how, in fact, man knows the world; and you will have to acknowledge the existence of both a world which lies beyond mind and of a

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[6] SL, p. 87. This conflict will be explored through Weil's writings in chapters III and IV.

[7] When something, says Weil, seems impossible to obtain despite every effort, it is an indication of a limit which cannot be passed on that plane and of the necessity for a change of level – a break in the ceiling. To wear ourselves out in efforts on the same level degrades us'. See GG, pp. 87-8. See also, J. C. Eaton, 'Simone Weil and Feminist Spirituality', in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986), 691-704 (pp. 700-01).

[8] Forthcoming investigations will show that Weil's work on human oppression and exploitation is largely due to the unfortunate operations of social systems (for example, heavy industry and technical production) that exploit the nature and welfare of human beings. In view of her religious preoccupations, she argued that Roman Catholicism and its exclusive take on the nature of the divine in comparison to religious truth claims of non-Christian denominations meant that it engineered as much of a division between individuals as she identified within the socio-political system. For further details, see OL and LTAP, pp. 1ff.

[9] Dorothy McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 9.

> mind, which far from passively reflecting the world, exercises itself on the world with the double aim of knowing it and transforming it.[10]

Intent upon this double aim of knowing and transforming the world, Weil struggled relentlessly with the dialectical tension between her vision of absolute truth and the inadequacy of her ideas.[11] It is not surprising then to find that her philosophical and theological inquires aim to creatively integrate themes and perspectives often separated out in modern thought or treated as mutually exclusive.[12] The purpose behind integrating these themes, as chapter I suggested, corresponds to Weil's concern that contemporary thought holds on to one term in order to eliminate its opposition to the other; when separation, as the Weil scholar, Alexander Nava demonstrates, 'gives rise to either neglect or to a suspicion of the importance and value of the other'.[13] To keep any given term in a synthetic relation to its antithesis enables her to ultimately drive the individual towards the difficulties and tensions within metaphysical thinking so that the human being is not only brought firmly into reality, but equally changed and transformed by it.[14]

Chapters II to IV, therefore, explore the contradictions of her life and thoughts that attempt to get the individual to return to and make contact with the divine.[15] This point of return and contact though is only possible by accepting the void, that is to say, by demonstrating a willingness to give up worldly illusions and accept the inevitable reality of nothingness in order to pass over to the divine. The void in this sense is a type of contradiction used by Weil to establish both the absence and presence of God in creation. She says the world must be regarded 'as containing something of a void in order that it

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[10] OL, pp. 30-1.

[11] What does become apparent, for example, through Weil's assessments of oppression and liberty is the gulf she experiences between the certainty of her vision of utopia in which human beings, living in freedom, are working in mutual co-operation with one another, and how, in a 'Sketch of Contemporary Social Life' she immediately recognises the gulf between this ideal and the form which modern civilisation has assumed in contemporary life. See OL, pp. 101-02.

[12] Examples of this integration include the relation between theory and practice, religion and politics, and goodness and evil. See Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*, p. 3.

[13] Ibid.

[14] One such example of this tension comes in the form of Weil's experience and conception of 'Affliction'. As a form of extreme suffering and something close to an experience of death, affliction rightly endured is what constitutes the 'key' to the door of the world beyond, the 'other reality'. See WFG, pp. 66ff. Further explorations of Weil's concept of affliction will be explored in Part II.

[15] See Rush Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait*, pp. 33-4.

may have need of God'.[16] Consequently, the void exposes the tension and separation between the human and the divine, and therefore, the tensions that will be shown to emerge in her social, political and religious aspirations.[17] This contradiction is discussed explicitly in chapter IV. In the meantime, it will emerge indirectly through an assessment of Weil's worldly relations and her preoccupation with the transcendent reality. These chapters also attempt then to explore if, ultimately speaking, she ever managed to remain poised in the contradiction of the void in order that the material was privileged by the presence, contact and integration of the spiritual – the claim that her thinking is non-dualistic.[18] Or alternatively, if the persistent pull between the human and the divine meant that her thinking privileged the spiritual at the expense of and in retreat from the material, (the charge that her thinking is dualistic), failing therefore, to bring both worlds into a meaningful and transformative capacity for the salvation of human beings.[19]

Chapter II, III and IV entitled 'Sourcing the Void', 'Thinking the Void' and 'Experiencing the Void' respectively attempt, therefore, to investigate the tension of nothingness in Weil's intellectual and experiential vocation between the human and the divine. Precisely, chapter II aims to assess the sources of voiding by exploring the nature, context and structure of Weil's thoughts, her philosophical methodology, and moreover, her attempt to establish a theory of knowledge of the world. One particular theme that has in some cases gone unnoticed in Weil commentaries is her use of French philosophical resources in the development of her own intellectual anthologies.[20] These sources that will be shown to support the framework of her philosophical methodology will be discussed in conjunction with the enormous intellectual influence of her mentor and tutor,

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[16] See GG, p. 11.

[17] For Weil, part of the soul that experiences death is a point of contact with the divine: 'we know that we cannot see him face to face without dying, and we do not want to die'. This tension is expressed in the tension between accepting and resisting the void between the human and the divine. See NB, p. 623.

[18] See, for example, Eric O. Springsteen, *Christ's Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*, p. 89; Patrick Patterson and Lawrence E. Schmidt, 'The Christian Materialism of Simone Weil, *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, pp. 77-93.

[19] The difficulty for her to accept, for example, in her letter to Maurice Shaman in 1943, the contradictory premise that there is a kind of affiliation between this world and the perfection of God reflects the same difficulty she had at appreciating the affinity between her life and ideas. See SL, p. 128.

[20] One example of this development occurs with Weil's analysis of the French philosopher, Jules Bandeau's cubic box. 'None of the appearances (or views) of the box, she says, has the form of the cube, but whoever turns the box around knows that the cubic form is what determines the variation of the apparent form'. What these variations imply is that in spite of the difference and diversity within the world, all things in the universe are fundamentally related to one another in an ordered, regulated fashion. This determining factor represents the very body of the object [...]'. See IC, pp. 178-9.

Alain, not to mention the wider philosophical movement in early 20th century France and Europe.[21] Part of this exploration of her thoughts is also to bridge her adolescent experiences with the full weight of her intellectual vocation to bring the supernatural into the socio-political dimensions of human life.[22] Finally, the combination of her basic philosophical premise and the influence of her intellectual predecessors lead to an exploration into Weil's epistemology, which attempts to address the relation between thought and action in the world through an assessment and re-assessment of Descartes metaphysics.[23]

These developments provide the basis in which to illustrate and assess her attempts to 'reconstruct the world in accordance with the facts of her own experience'.[24] Weil's reconstruction is the foundation in which to move towards a development of her metaphysical preoccupations with the material world. What comes to light in this reconstruction and Weil's intellectual determination to bring both worlds into relation with one another through, for example her Cartesian dissertation,[25] is her affair with contradiction.[26] As suggested earlier, Weil's paradoxical thinking corresponds to what Fritz Staal says on the nature of spiritual experience. Spiritual experiences, he says, cannot be determined on either a rational or irrational basis; rather the meaning in these encounters tends to be based on contradictory assertions that struggle to be explained

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[21] In her introduction to Weil's dissertation on Descartes, McFarland comments that much of what has been sometimes regarded as idiosyncratic in her thought has antecedents in and carries forward aspects of the exacting training she received in a branch of nineteenth-century French Philosophy, known as 'Spiritualism'. I intend to explore these themes as a basis in which to understand the nature of Weil's thoughts. See Simone Weil, *Formative Writings: 1929-1941*, trans. and ed. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina Van Ness (London: Rutledge, 1987), p. 7. Hereafter, cited as FW.

[22] One key feature of Weil's adolescent experiences was an awakening to an 'alternative kingdom' through experiences of social and political division. This encounter was regarded as an early adolescent crisis which several Weil commentators use to address the nature of her philosophical and theological investigations. I aim to explore this crisis at the start of chapter II in order to address the motivation behind Weil's intellectual preoccupations with the world. In the meantime, see WFG, p. 64.

[23] Ibid., pp. 21-88.

[24] J. M. Perrin & G. Thibon, *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 1953), p. 119. Hereafter, cited as PT.

[25] Written for the École Normale Supérieure during the 1929-30 school year, (École Normale Supérieure is a place whereby the elite of upper Lycée and university teachers are trained) Weil attempts to demonstrate that modern science, by rejecting the commonsense thinking of ordinary individuals, becomes an inadequate tool for true knowledge. Knowing that Descartes is regarded as the dualist whose philosophical, mathematical and mechanical investigations represent much of the modern worldview Weil goes to the source of modern science in Descartes to argue that his epistemology does not accord with the nature and development of scientific thought. See FW, p. 23.

[26] TNFR, p. vii.

using precise language or by means of a single belief system.[27] One must also be willing in that case to observe that her affair with paradox is not likely to establish a universal consensus of how to interpret her life and work.[28] I will come back to this point in due course.

In the meantime, one such example of her affair with contradiction occurs in a letter she wrote to her beloved friend and priest, Father Perrin in the last remaining years of her life. In this letter, which Simone Pétrement recalls, Weil explains to Perrin that she would prefer 'people not to take a particular interest in her person and her life. On the contrary, she wanted them to examine her ideas and make an effort to find out whether or not they were true'.[29] The one fundamental problem with this is that it immediately abandons the foundation in which she came to regard the validity of her ideas in the first place. As McFarland suggests, Weil uses personal experience in order to establish a framework in which to understand and apply her 'transcendent kingdom' to the world.[30] The suggestion here is that there is a close affinity between the intensity of her ideas and the intensity of her personality to perceive and mediate them into the world.[31] Strictly speaking, to keep to Weil's request not only compromises the basis in which she did philosophy, but more importantly, rejects the context of her ideas which aided in the discovery of them in the first place. Most notably, the Catholic Philosopher, Father Gustave Thibon, puts this point across in his commentary on Weil: 'we are too apt to forget that the illustrious dead were living people like ourselves – *"en situation"* (in concrete surrounding) as Gabriel Marcel would say – involved in the order of time and space and subject to admixture and limitation'.[32]

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[27] Fritz Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 22-3. See also BHD, pp. 112-13.

[28] In due course, I will attempt to elucidate the point that Weil's affair with contradiction has ultimately propagated a vast range of commentaries on her life and work that are not necessarily commensurable with one another.

[29] P, p. vii.

[30] Dorothy McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 16.

[31] Francine du Plessix Gray's commentary of her post-adolscent crisis elucidates this point. She says, 'the emotional crisis of Simone's adolescence had provoked her to create a new persona: Between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, she evolved an appearance that would not change much for the rest of her life'. In addition to the awkwardness of her outward appearance, there was also a growing difficulty for her to demonstrate a strong self-identity as she often remarked amongst friends and family that it was a great misfortune to have been born a female. See Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, p. 19, 28.

[32] PT, p. 111.

From a different perspective, other commentators have also identified the importance of context in Weil's thoughts. Generally speaking, they argue that because she was able to bring a social consciousness into her spiritual thoughts that she was able to make sense of the social and political framework of human life.[33] Given therefore that she believes in the interconnectedness of creation, and her 'alternative kingdom' attempts to close the 'gap' between the elite and the masses, Weil was inclined to engage with the tension between the spiritual and prophetic dimensions of reality – the prophetic tradition referring to an abandonment of spiritual thought in favour of promoting social and economic justice[34] – rather than eclipse the spiritual element involved in the interest of promoting social and economic justice.[35] So it seems incomprehensible to actively do any sort of commentary on her ideas in isolation from the human experiences that initially gave 'birth' to them.

The broader aim of Chapters II and III examine Weil's desire to separate out her ideas from her experiences, and address the potential implications not only over whether she can appropriately use the metaphysical in order to illuminate the physical world, but also if she can effectively reconstruct the world in accordance with the facts of her own experience.[36] Several readings such as Alexander Nava's *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutierrez*, Mary Dietz' *Between the Human and the Divine*, and Peter Winch's *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"*, have responded to the subtlety of Weil's persistent drive from her adolescent years until her death to bring her spiritual reality into the socio-political dimensions of human life and vice versa.[37] Consequently, they have assessed her ideas and concepts through the framework in which she developed them, that is, through her relentless attention to the tensions and contradictions of being in the world. Moreover, several assessments have also turned to

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[33] See John M. Dunaway, 'Estrangement and the Need for Roots: Prophetic Visions of the Human Condition in Albert Camus and Simone Weil', *Religion and Literature* 17 (1985), 35-42; David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, pp. 65-66; 'Religion and Politics in the Thought of Simone Weil', *Centre for the Study of Religion and Society* 24 (1991), 1-19; BHD, p. 125.

[34] For a discussion on the prophetic tradition, see ibid., pp. 4, 107-32.

[35] Weil was inclined through her witnessing of oppression, injustice and inequality to maintain and cultivate a mystical, spiritual element that established the possibility of a more meaningful pursuit of justice and equality. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

[36] J. M. Perrin & G. Thibon, *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 1953), p. 119. Hereafter, cited as PT.

[37] I aim to use these resources in addition to other commentaries on Weil that address the relation between thought and experience in the development of her literature on the human situation.

the intensity of her humanity and sense of individual and communal identity in order to establish the credibility of her inquiries with the world.[38] These readings, in other words, are an attempt to bring the reader into an experience of the tension of Weil's ideas rather than just the abstractness of them. Readings that reflect solely upon her ideas avoid not only the way in which she understood philosophy to be, but fail to comprehend the way she focused her thoughts on issues to do with the material world.[39] In that case, the basis of this problem is clearly to do with Weil's own address to Father Perrin, but subsequent interpretations over the years that have, for example, focused exclusively on Weil's theology[40] have both gone some way to broadly missing the fact that she was ultimately a trained philosopher, belonging to a line of philosophical thought, and that the basis in which she did philosophy required as much of her experience of the world to develop her thoughts and ideas as the use of her intellectual gifts to deepen and expand their significance.[41]

Upon reflection, Chapter II assesses how Weil's intellectual and experiential world operates, and more importantly attempts, philosophically speaking, to revive the essential nature of the human being as an active, intelligent being through her examination of Descartes' metaphysics. This chapter will also aim to show that she attempts to intellectually establish philosophical reflection as a form of spiritual living. She does not explicitly define 'spirituality', but she is cautious that it does not become something of a corrupted, sentimental state of experience: 'philosophy is exclusively an affair of action and practice'.[42] Given her intention to make philosophical thought a living reality that attends to the needs of the human soul, Weil's thoughts, as mentioned earlier, are fundamentally concerned to assess the tension between the individual and the natural world in as much as the tension between the human and the divine.[43] Both tensions represent the human condition in as much as the contradiction of the human condition.

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[38] This is particularly the case with Dietz' assessment of Weil's struggle to establish a constructive sense of individual and communal identity in the material world. See 'The Crisis of Identity' in BHD, pp. 3-36.
[39] This point is particularly emphasised by Dietz in her reading of Weil when she says: Weil's later work is not exclusively focused on mysticism, 'but rather the extent to which she resists its pull and remains attentive to issues of human morality and politics'. See ibid., p. 125. See also, Stanley Godman, 'Simone Weil', *The Dublin Review* (1950), 67-81 (pp. 70-2).
[40] See footnote 11 from Chapter I.
[41] See FW, p. 7.
[42] FLN, p. 362.
[43] This particular theme is explored in great detail in Part I of BHD, pp. 1-36.

The essential contradiction in the human condition, according to Weil, 'is that man is subject to force, and craves for justice. He is subject to necessity, and craves for the good'.[44] Chapter III will examine the former as a social tension, and Chapter IV explores the latter as a divine tension.

Given that part of Chapter II identifies the fusion between Weil's early adolescent concern towards the essence of the human being and that her intellectual revival of that essence is represented as the sole activity of the mind, Chapter III aims to establish not only this essence within the polis, but that the activity of mind forms the basis of her social theory. That is to say, her basic social theory is concerned with the relationship between the mind and the world, and the resurrection of that relationship emerges in the actual transformation of thought into action.[45] For Weil, this transformation in her social and political writings is a representation of human freedom from the human situation of oppression and exploitation. The tension, as mentioned earlier, between 'raising the individual' and the individual 'struggling free from bondage',[46] is precisely the social tension she identifies between human liberty and human oppression. Alternatively put, it is the tension between the 'I' and 'We' in her social and political writings,[47] that is to say, the tension between the essential nature of human beings and the threat posed to that nature by a contemporary world,[48] that Weil identifies the existence of human slavery, but equally, that every individual is born to live in freedom.[49] This will form the basis in which to assess her theoretical analysis of the social system in both a collection of essays entitled *Oppression and Liberty*, and in one prominent political essay in this collection, 'Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression'.[50]

Nevertheless, in light of earlier discoveries of the problem Weil has in the relation between thought and personal experience, Chapter III aims to examine the concern over

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[44] Simone Weil, *Gateway to God* (Glasgow: Collins Fontana books, 1974), p. 37. Hereafter, cited as GaG.
[45] See OL, pp. 18-19.
[46] SL, p. 87.
[47] Dietz identifies this tension between 'I' and 'We' as Weil's 'dilemma of worldliness', that is to say, Weil's dilemma between individual autonomy and collective belonging. See BHD, pp. 14-15. I will refer to Dietz' analysis and expand upon it in the course of inquiring into this tension in chapter III.
[48] The power, as Blumenthal says, of hostile, blind, anonymous mechanisms, 'grinding human beings into fragments in a hell of wars, destruction, destitution, and moral injury'. See G. Blumenthal, 'Simone Weil's Way of the Cross', p. 227.
[49] See OL, p. 70.
[50] Ibid., pp. 36-117.

whether she focuses too exclusively on the situation of the oppressed, to the extent that her analysis of the social system is predominantly individualistic and highly intellectual.[51] By implication, freedom insists upon the elimination of the 'We' in favour of the 'I', which then begs the question, how does a human being express its discovered freedom within the 'We' since the occupation of a person's private thoughts is one thing, but to bring that occupation into the public domain is quite another.[52] Ultimately, however, her goal is to establish freedom in a way that enables the human being to make contact with God.[53] In which case, to withhold from making premature conclusions at this stage, the final sections of Chapter III and Chapter IV attempt to explore the reality of human liberty within the context of Weil's religious thoughts and experiences.

Precisely, the closing sections of Chapter III will continue to examine the struggle between the 'I' and the 'We' of her social analyses and political activities but within the context of her religious aspirations. With her social theory attending to the hostility and destruction of social collectivities[54] that drive towards a division of labour in industry and production, an assessment of Weil's theology will begin with an exploration of her conception and understanding of God in order to understand and assess her continuing hostility towards the state in the form of organized religion, particularly, Christianity in the Roman Catholic Church.[55] With a deep reluctance to accept membership into an

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[51] David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, p. 91. Forthcoming discussions aim to elucidate her attempts to address the realities of injustice from an intellectual standpoint and through her experience of physical work in order to validate her conceptual findings. This issue, which is discussed at a later stage in this chapter, and incidentally raised for different reasons by another prominent female philosopher of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt, is never fully taken up in Weil's writings. Instead, the worker is faced with the prospect of a new way of thinking that aims to bring it into contact with the supernatural but into less contact with the climate of its own experiences.

[52] The 20th century philosopher, Hannah Arendt, makes a similar point. In a famous text entitled, *The Human Condition*, Arendt marks out the spaces between the role of public and private expression, and that ultimately speaking, the two can never coincide in their full capacity. See Hannah Arent, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), pp. 74-6. A similar point is also made by Sylvie Courtine-Denamy: See Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 74.

[53] Weil's discovery of the essential nature of the human being is part of an early intellectual investigation that began with her dissertation on Descartes and evolved into her social and political writings. I aim to examine her views on the nature of the human being throughout part II.

[54] Weil describes 'collectivity' as a 'blind social mechanism' that opposes the individual and is a fundamental threat to a human being's 'supreme dignity' which is thought itself. Fundamentally, the collective is described as something that passes the individual in strength. In OL, Weil uses collectivity in relation to Industry, centralised bureaucracy and society itself. See OL, pp. 110-16. See also, BHD, pp. 50ff.

[55] Weil's letter to Father Perrin entitled *A Letter to a Priest* will be the main resource in this inquiry.

organized church, when it clearly has a history, as she argues, of the 'most appalling cruelties', what then established the basis of Weil's understanding of God will constitute several investigations towards the end of chapter III and throughout chapter IV.

Briefly speaking, the basis of Weil's religious and spiritual inquiries is rooted in her social and political preoccupations; both avenues, as I have attempted to point out earlier, are entirely interconnected. What does emerge, however, is not so much her earlier affections for Cartesian thought, but her growing intensity towards Greek thought, particularly Plato. As the 'introduction' to Doering and Springsted's edition of *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* suggests, Weil's 'social and religious thought is thoroughly infused both with references to Plato and with a Platonic spirit; she wrote numerous essays on Plato and the ancient Greeks – because she thought they were important for the present'.[56] What she means by this can be summarized by Pierre Hadot's argument that the Greeks were actually much more interested in the idea of philosophy as a way of life, grounded in the reality of the Good and the demands that it makes on the way in which life ought to be lived and conducted.[57] What has taken place in the later periods of 20th century theology is a re-evaluation of the relationship between Christianity and Greek or Platonic Philosophy. In the 1930s the Christian Theologian, Andres Nygren, argued that the Greeks made no significant contribution to Christianity because their conception of God was understood in terms of the impassibility of the divine and the moral distance of God from humanity.[58] But there is no doubt, according to recent writings on the relationship between Greek thought and Christianity, that Christian Platonism has influenced the history of Christian spirituality and mysticism.[59] In order to make sense of human misery in relation to God, Weil wanted to recognize the distance between God and creation, but also the affinity between the human and the divine. What makes this unity possible is the void, that is to say, what enables both the human and the divine to make contact takes place across an inherent void which resides between both worlds. Her essays on Prometheus, Antigone and the *Iliad* in *Intimation of*

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[56] E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (eds.), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2004), p. 3.
[57] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase.
[58] Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).
[59] See Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paidea* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1961).

Christianity, for example, exhibit this reality of the void.[60] The relation between Christianity and this Greek genius is a strong one, and Weil attempts to forge a connection in an attempt to address the tension between the human and the divine in her religious thoughts. The end of chapter III and most of chapter IV, therefore, aim to explore this tension by identifying and examining the oscillation between her withdrawal from and engagement with the world. Sources that aim to support her alliance to Ancient Greece will be shown to appear throughout a series of axioms from her *Notebooks, First and Last Notebooks,* and *Imitations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks.* References to key sections are expected to demonstrate Weil's transformation of key Platonic texts by way of her own meditation.[61]

Weil's earlier difficulties to integrate her social and political ideas within the community appear to have found a way through to perhaps resolving the tension between the human and the divine. But Chapter IV, however, puts a question mark on this possibility for Weil's mystical theology will be shown to take a rather radical u-turn from the Platonic bridge between worlds at the end of Chapter III to a theology of withdrawal and worldly renunciation. After her conversion experience to Christ at the Abbey of Solesmes in 1938, Weil withdrew from active participation in trade unions (though not from her work on social issues), gave up teaching, and entered into a period of intense reflection.[62] This withdrawal corresponded to her escape from the struggle between the 'I' and the 'We'; she had escaped it by coming into contact with another world beyond both 'I' and 'We'.[63] Her withdrawal from the polis in the aftermath of 1938 corresponded to her mystical writings on the absence and the hiddenness of God. Taking Plato's assertion that the Good is beyond Being in book seven of the *Republic*, Weil equates the

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[60] See IC, especially 'The Pythagorean Doctrine'.

[61] Weil's meditation on ancient philosophy leads to several correlations between the ancient Hellenic world and Christianity. For example, towards the end of essay, 'The *Illiad*, Poem of Might', Weil complements these two cultures: 'The Gospels are the last and most marvelous expression of Greek genius, as the *Illiad* is its first expression'. There are several key texts where Weil meditates upon this relationship between Ancient Greece and Christianity. I will discuss some of these meditations in order to illustrate Weil's interpretation and reading of Plato. See IC, p. 52, 151-201. For commentaries on Weil's meditations of the ancient world, see Eric O. Springsted, 'Conditions and Dialogue: John Hick and Simone Weil' in *The Journal of Religion* 72 (1992), 19-35 (pp. 27-30), Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1983).

[62] See WFG, pp. 64ff.

[63] BHD, pp. 22-23.

Good with God,[64] and interprets the aspect of 'beyond being' as simply the nothingness of the divine.[65]

What is, perhaps, a more deepening concern is how this act of self-renunciation and her theology of the contradiction of creation closely correspond to various tenets of the ancient world of Gnosticism. Gnostic thought in its many varieties, holds that knowledge, gnosis, is the key to human salvation, and that ignorance is the only fallen condition, not sin.[66] What is more significant, however, is that gnosis is something that is directly acquired between the individual and God rather than through the mediation of institutional Christianity.

The remaining sections of Chapter IV are intended to show that far from Gnosticism being merely understood as a strict dualistic religious phenomenon, it in fact attempts to use its dualistic themes in which to illuminate a non-dualistic relationship between God and creation as well as with all human beings.[67] As I have attempted to point out in Chapter I, this contemporary approach to Gnostic thought – neo-gnosticism – will aim to address Weil's difficulty in relating the supernatural to the natural world. In addition, where several commentaries have been at pains to keep her theology clear of Gnostic tenets,[68] in this thesis, however, Gnosticism is given a 'makeover' that will attempt to expose some of its subtle, non-dualistic tenets in order to highlight Weil's difficulties of juxtaposing the human and the divine in such a way that human beings are capable of self-transformation and self-realization through its struggle in and with the world.

In summation, the aim of Part II is to address Weil's intellectual and personal vocation with worldly relations, and to ask whether, in spite of the close affinity between her intellectual and experiential vocation, she focuses too exclusively on the activity of

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[64] FLN, p. 349.
[65] Simone Weil, *Cahiers III* (Paris: Plon, 1974), p. 120. Hereafter, cited as CIII.
[66] See PA, p. 25.
[67] In short, Gnosticism is essential driven to consistently rework its mythology – there is no static, dogmatic body of myths with a fixed meaning. See T. Freke and P. Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians*, p. 102; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*; J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries*.
[68] See, for example, Dorothy McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 118.

thought itself rather than the incarnation of thought into action or experience.[69] Ultimately, one is concerned not to capture what is simply compelling about her religious, social and political thinking as such – that has already been done in countless commentaries. Rather, this discussion also attempts to understand where it fails and why. The ultimate purpose here, however, is not to suggest that her thought is a failed enterprise or that her enterprise merely reflected a sad and troubled life, but rather to show how Weil's life for all its ups and downs, its strengths and weaknesses, represent to us the remarkable difficulty and demanding course of human life. The consequences of these oscillations in her life and work will be explored in part IV, 'The Genesis of the Search for Salvation'. In the meantime, as the French Philosopher, Vincent Descombes once suggested, if the good has not yet been achieved because there is nothing concrete to say that it has, 'the idealist for whom we have no time today, will be right tomorrow'.[70] The question then is this: is Weil the idealist who will be right tomorrow? Has she managed to take the dialectic exchange of the errors of today and recognized that their truth may come tomorrow? In order to find out, one has to begin to explore the nature and context of Weil's affair with the human and the divine.

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[69] A similar point is also made by Sylvie Courtine-Denamy: 'for Weil as for Alain, only thought is action'. See Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 74.

[70] Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p. 17.

Chapter II: Sourcing the 'Void'

> Men believed that errant thought, given over to sense impressions and passions, was not real thought. They believed that they would find the higher kind of thought in certain men who seemed godlike to them, and they made them their priests and kings. But as they had no idea what this higher way of thinking might be, they deified in their priests, under the name of religion, the most fantastic beliefs.[71]

2.1 *Introduction*

The aim of this chapter is to inquire into and understand Weil's system of thought. Having briefly addressed key issues concerning her life and writings, the focus of attention now turns to the nature and structure of her ideas that aim to establish and develop her understanding and perception of the human condition. Given that an earlier assessment of this condition is ultimately dependent upon Weil's conception of God and the human–divine relationship, it is important to address the origins of her thought, and how these thoughts establish her understanding of the human condition. Discussed earlier in the 'Prelude', here preoccupation with the human condition, the transcendent reality and the relation between the two, means that she was totally dedicated to an inquiry into the source as well as the foundations of true knowledge. It seems unsurprising then to suggest, therefore, that her inclination towards metaphysical thought implies that she was immediately drawn to several key philosophers of the enlightenment period and the ancient philosophical world.

Amongst several others that Weil encountered during her lifetime, Descartes and Plato respectively, had the most significant influence on her.[72] In fact, whilst Platonic epistemology will be shown to be crucial for Weil with regards to her belief in the supremacy of thought, Descartes, as Pétrement remarks, initially established this belief in her. Descartes was her most passionate concern. The more important point to realize is

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[71] FW, p. 30.
[72] For Plato, see IC, pp. 74-150; on Descartes, see FW, pp. 21-28.

that both Descartes and Plato were instrumental for Weil's inquiry into authentic knowledge.[73] As I aim to show in this chapter – with reference to Descartes – is that he helped to establish in her a firm, metaphysical treatise on the difference between this world of illusion and the supernatural world of absolute truth. Her particular attention towards Plato, set for Chapter III, is that Plato in her writings would establish a direction and goal for human life.

Before one can begin, however, with a consideration of Plato, the structure and nature of Weil's thoughts, in particular, her approach to doing philosophy and the influence of her French philosophical predecessors, needs to be addressed in conjunction with a consideration of Descartes' role in the early days of her intellectual development. Her approach to philosophical reflection is crucial to her use of Descartes, and indeed Plato, but in relation to Descartes particularly, her conception of philosophy amounted to explicit reservations against the limited application of elite scientific knowledge of the modern world to ordinary people. Reflections on Weil's thoughts here will depend on the use of several key texts such as her *Formative Writings, Waiting for God,* Simone Pétrement's *Simone Weil*, and various commentaries on her early intellectual development.

2.2 *Weil's Source of Philosophy in Early Childhood*

One immediate obstacle that is presented with any commentary on Weil's life and thoughts is to know how and where to begin. To account for the breadth and detail of her entire life's intellectual explorations is, perhaps, a rather overwhelming task that will lend more confusion than clarity to the nature of her ideas and beliefs. Nevertheless, one particular way through to a comprehensive understanding of her work is suggested in Raymond Rosenthal's review of Weil in *The New Leader*. In his article, he comments that she had a 'marvellous ability [...] to reflect the whole of her work in each of its

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[73] For further discussions on these themes, see Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: "The Just balance"*, pp. 5-31; Michael Narcy, 'The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil's Platonism', in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 23-42; Patrick Patterson and Lawrence E. Schmidt, 'The Christian Materialism of Simone Weil', in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 77-94.

parts'.[74] By implication then, wherever one begins will reflect her basic philosophical and theological precepts that emerge in her religious, political and social preoccupations in and for the world. But this begs the question of how to represent the whole of her work in order to understand it in each of its parts? Simply put, the primacy of Weil's thought is concerned to reveal that each and every living thing or event in the universe is completely interconnected, and that the basis of these interconnections are determined by the operation of a single universal, unchanging principle. This ultimate principle refers to Plato's notion of the Good.[75] For Weil, Plato's impersonal good is directed towards God – God is the sole good located outside this world.[76] Though she was consciously unaware of the impact that her association with the good would have in her later religious writings and experiences, Weil in fact, began to 'search for the Good' during her adolescent years. To be precise, this search did not begin in comfortable circumstances. A crisis of confidence to do with what she considered to be the inadequacy of her cognitive abilities, led her to experience and embrace a transcendental realm, a heavenly 'kingdom', where all human beings are entitled to have equal access, without intellectual qualification and merit, to the nature of truth.[77] It is important to perhaps consider this experience in more detail given the influence it would make in her early intellectual writings.

In her 'Spiritual Autobiography', written in Marseilles in 1942, Weil recalls an early childhood experience of falling into what she calls, 'one of those fits of bottomless despair'.[78] Given the extraordinary intellectual gifts that she displayed throughout her life, and the admiration she received during early and late adulthood, one is a little surprised to find that her 'bottomless despair' was the result of a pessimistic belief in the 'mediocrity of her natural faculties'.[79] The cause of this despair resides with the mathematical brilliance of her brother André. She goes on to say, 'the exceptional gifts of

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[74] Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), p. 94.
[75] The good is not only the 'one unique good' in which 'all beauties, all truths are diverse and partial aspects', but is also the supernatural and purified principle in which the material world is entirely dependent. See FLN, p. 98, pp. 307-10.
[76] LP, p. 219. Hereafter, cited as LP. The 'good' for Plato though did not represent the divine reality. Weil's use of Plato in forthcoming chapters will address this difference and its implications.
[77] Ibid.
[78] WFG, p. 64.
[79] Ibid.

my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me'.[80] Though she had no real concern for 'visible successes', what did persistently plague her mind was the idea of being excluded 'from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides'. As she had entertained the thought of dying because of her feelings of intellectual mediocrity, her feelings of death were even more apparent at the thought of living without the truth 'from that transcendental kingdom'.

These aspirations alone which Weil recalls at the tender age of fourteen, leaves one with little doubt that she did possess in early adolescence something unusual or unique about her intellect, which begs one to question her own sense of mediocrity. Nevertheless, 'after months of inward darkness', she suddenly received what could be described as a lifetime conviction that 'any human being [...] can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment. He thus becomes a genius too, even though for lack of talent his genius cannot be visible from outside'.[81] From this time (1921-23) to her diploma dissertation for the École Normale (1929-1930), Weil transformed her experience of fourteen into a thesis entitled, *Science et perception dans Descartes*. Her assessment of Descartes will be examined a little later.

The ideal of an 'alternative kingdom' that is universally accessible explains not only her belief in the interconnectedness of creation, but more importantly, her supreme passion for justice and equality, and above all, a concern for the human soul.[82] The combination of her passions and concerns suggest that Weil was likely to have participated in human affairs, and therefore, unlikely to withdrawal into a separate world

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[80] Ibid., p. 66.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Most commentators on Weil's life and work have suggested that her basic preoccupation with humanity has been her passion to drive forward a sense of justice and equality in society. Weil on justice and equality see, for example, Roy Pierce, 'Sociology and Utopia: The Early Writings of Simone Weil', *Political Science Quarterly* 77 (1962), 505-25; Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, 'Inhuman Conduct and Unpolitical Theory', *Political Theory* 4 (1984), 301-17; Fred Rosen 'Labour and Liberty: Simone Weil and the Human Condition', *Theoria and Theory* (1973), 33-47; Miklos Vetö, 'Simone Weil and Suffering', *Thought* 40 (1965), 275-86. Inevitably, as T. S. Eliot comments in his 'Preface' to *The Need for Roots*, Weil's vocation with the world would suggest that she had a deeply moving concern for the human soul. 'She was a passionate champion of the common people'; so much so that she 'was a patriot who would gladly have been sent back to France to suffer and die for her compatriots'. See T. S. Eliot, 'Preface', in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (London: Routledge, 1952), p. vii-ix. Hereafter, *The Need for Roots* is cited as TNFR.

of absolute, abstract notions that separated thought from the reality of human life. Indeed, her participation in manual labour and in the general struggles of the world during childhood evoked a belief in the importance of voluntary suffering.[83] During Weil's later adolescent years, she wrote an extraordinary essay on Alexander the Great called 'The Beautiful and the Good' on this particular theme. In this essay she recounts the story of Alexander pouring out his allotment of water in order to share in his army's suffering. For Weil, this act was a willingness 'to redeem suffering men through voluntary suffering. Every saint has poured out the water; every saint has rejected all well-being that would separate him from the suffering of other men'.[84] Weil's own personal experience of suffering which in many ways constituted her late mystical writings on the importance of self-effacement are largely to do with the ethos of family life that was committed wholeheartedly to the needs of others, in addition to the enormous emotional influence of Simone Weil's mother, Selma Weil (known as Mme. Weil).[85]

One particular example of this commitment displayed in Weil's late writings of worldly renunciation emerge through Mme. Weil's encouragement that both Simone and André go without chocolate and sugar at a time when much of French society was feeling the intensity of war. Both children joined the *Filleuls de guerre*, where each child had a *filleul* – a godson – a soldier at the front to whom each would send gifts such as sugar and chocolate. Weil even did chores to earn money so that she could purchase useful items for her 'godson'.[86] Further, an important foundation of Weil's mystical writings of self-effacement relate not only to her love of the poor and afflicted and her feelings of intellectual inferiority and inadequacy in relation to André, but the nature of her relationship with her mother.[87] Simone once commented that her 'brother is like a tooth;

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[83] For a good discussion of Weil's childhood willingness to engage in hard, physical labour inasmuch as her passion to suffer for the sake of others, see Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), pp. 1-21. See also, P, pp. 3-24.

[84] See P, p. 37.

[85] P, pp. 11-12.

[86] André Weil, in a BBC interview with Malcolm Muggeridge on 'The Life and Death of Simone Weil', argues that such behaviour was common during a time where idealisation of heroism and self-sacrifice was not unusual. See GaG, pp. 148-60.

[87] P, pp. 26-7. The relationship between Simone Weil and her mother has in many ways been attributed to a prolonged period of infantilism in which women in French culture were provided with a very sheltered education that was often directed by the role of their mothers. See Stanley Hoffman (ed.), *In Search of France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

it is a good thing provided one is not forced to become aware too often that it exists'.[88] There indeed exists another aspect of Weil's life that she was also quite happy to acknowledge its non-existence, and through her mother's encouragement, I refer to her unfortunate situation of being born a woman. Her attention towards the needs of others then was not simply a juxtaposition of a culture-orientated phenomenon and a deep sense of self-loathing in relation to her brother André, but that, through her mother's unbending support, worldly renunciation and self-effacement for Weil was also precipitated by a deep-rooted denial of her identity as a woman.[89]

In view of the fact that the last sentence has drawn together a close correlation between Weil's encounters with her brother and her mother, there is an important development in this connection that is worth exploring for the purpose of examining Weil's intellectual and experiential vocation with the world. In summation, this correspondence between André and Selma brings to light a correlation between her experience of intellectual 'mediocrity' and her steady denial of womanhood, indeed her denial of the self. Having explored already her adolescent crisis, one clearly sees that as a young child, Simone totally surrendered her identity to André.[90] Through this imitation of her brother, the aftermath of her adolescent crisis would inevitably provoke a sudden change in persona. Indeed, between the ages of thirteen to fifteen, 'she evolved an appearance that would not change much for the rest of her life. A mass of uncombed black hair and huge tortoiseshell-framed glasses nearly obscured her small, delicate face. An even more forbidding aspect of her physique was the clumsy clothing with which she covered her angular body. They were clothes of a ragtag soldier or a poor monk'.[91] Where one would believe that her behaviour would merely reflect a temporary adolescent identity crisis, the garments of her clothes depicted a monastic, masculine cut that clearly exacerbated her growing problem with femaleness.[92] Thus, her mediocre intellectual abilities in relation to André emerge alongside her forthright rejection of being female, which her mother strongly advocated throughout most of her early and late adult life.

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[88] BHD, pp. 4-5.
[89] See Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, pp. 18-20.
[90] In his interview with Muggeridge, André commented how Weil as a child had always followed him and did everything that he did. See GaG, p. 148.
[91] See Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, p. 20.
[92] P, p. 27.

Having rejected a potential career as a medical doctor, Mme Weil appears to have rechanneled her own frustrations about gender towards her daughter. In a letter she once wrote to a friend, Mme Weil always preferred little boys to girls, and did her best 'to encourage in Simone not the simpering graces of a little girl, but the forthrightness of a boy, even if this must at times seem rude'.[93] Immersed in this conviction, Weil's parents encouraged her boyish attributes, often teasing her with reference to calling her their 'son number two'. She often reciprocated in the 'game' by signing her letters 'your respectful son'.[94] Aside the humour of this exchange, years later in an interview with Malcolm Muggeridge, André unequivocally acknowledged that 'it would not be wrong to call my mother in some ways a possessive character'.[95] Weil's response, says André, was simply to do 'her best to entertain the illusion in her mother that she, my sister, was my mother's thing in a way, and certainly, this caused a certain amount of strain on her, which, joined with many other strains, eventually led to her death'.

This pivotal point into key aspects of Weil's childhood and adolescent years is to clearly establish her crisis, and indeed the strain, of 'identifications'.[96] Where this discussion into some of her early life experiences are not specific platforms in which to expand the inquiry into a psychological profile, what they do offer is the opportunity to recognize these experiences as a context for her early and later philosophical, social and religious writings. The question over her sense of self-worth then corresponds to her desperate need to access an 'alternative kingdom' that is universally attainable, irrespective of a person's cognitive abilities. Combined with a struggle to find a sense of belonging in the family, Weil struggled to find a sense of communal belonging as she attempted to mediate this universal attainment of truth to the individual through an outright rejection of bourgeois existence and an exacerbated sentimentality towards justice and equality for the working class. So interconnected are these earlier experiences to her early intellectual developments that Gray comments how Weil's 'drab, unisex costuming was equally shaped by her visceral instinct for social equality'.[97] It would be

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[93] Ibid., p. 28.
[94] Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, pp. 19-20.
[95] GaG, p. 149.
[96] BHD, p. 8.
[97] Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, pp. 20-1.

better, says Weil, 'if everyone dressed the same way and for the same amount of money. [...] That way nobody would see our differences'.[98]

Therefore, her obsession in many ways with the ordinary person that appeared intellectually inferior and in isolation from the bourgeois community resembles her own sense of worthlessness and exclusion from the family.[99] Though it would be a mistake to conclude that Weil's lack of self-identification and her lack of a sustained identity with the world was primarily family orientated, what one does find is a familiarity between the strains and tensions of childhood manifesting through the difficulties of her intellectual preoccupations with the world. But what specifically impulsed her into this kind of relationship with reality was precisely the love and affection she had for the working class. Once on a subway station with Simone Petrément, Weil commented to her that out of the 'spirit of justice' she loved the workers more naturally; she found them 'more beautiful that the bourgeois'.[100]

With her love of the manual worker, the birth of a 'transcendent kingdom', and the corresponding belief that all human beings can attain truth, Weil's experiences began to transform into an intellectual context with the composition of an astonishing essay called, *Le beau et le bien*.[101] In this essay, she attempts to show that thought, expressed in redemptive action, is linked to the purity of the good in an ideal, metaphysical realm.[102] Retrospectively, the transformation of thought into action in the world that links to the good beyond it represents the essence of Weil's epistemic enterprise.[103] That is to say, the entire range of her published work is ordered entirely by one basic relationship in the world, namely, the relation between thought and action, and the importance for the mind to make contact with the material world.[104] Bent on then relating the world of truth with

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[98] Gabriella Fiora, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Joseph R. Berrigan (London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 26.

[99] These correlations will be shown to dramatically resemble some of Weil's later mystical writings where her early sense of unworthiness – the 'colour of dead leaves' as she once remarked (see WFG, p. 101) – emerge through her identification as a slave which she wrote in her experiences of oppression and then on the nature of extreme suffering – affliction. For further details, see OL, p. 145; SNL, p. 173.

[100] Ibid., p. 43.

[101] See Simone Weil, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 60-73. Hereafter, cited as OC.

[102] See Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, pp. 16-17.

[103] This enterprise will be examined in relation to her use of Descartes. See FW, pp. 21-88.

[104] The relation between thought and action, and the importance for the mind to make contact with the world is part of Weil's overall investigation into determining whether truth is accessible to all human beings or reserved just for the intellectual elite. See Michael Ross, 'Transcendence, Immanence, and

the world of matter, action, according to Weil, is a means by which the thinking individual is able to acquire proper knowledge of the world of value, and more importantly, to turn the acquisition of that knowledge from the metaphysical realm towards illuminating the reality of the physical world.[105]

This amounts to some discussion of the experiential sources of Weil's philosophical inquiries into the human situation and what would become the importance of directing that situation towards the divine. The important thing to realize here is how Weil's early childhood and adolescent experiences begin to facilitate her early intellectual passions to drive metaphysical thought firmly into the heart of human reality. The discussion, however, has to move into an exploration of the broader framework of Weil's philosophical system in order to bring forward an investigation into her early intellectual writings and resources.

2.3 *The Accessibility of Truth: The Philosopher versus the 'Village Idiot'*

The implication of philosophical dialogues that train and transform rather than simply *inform* the person, means that a desire for truth is accessible not just to the few that are 'geniuses' or abstract intellectuals, but rather to the ordinary individuals of society. This is what Weil has in mind with her approach to philosophy. In addition to her approach toward philosophical reflection from a personal point of view, she also took philosophical reflection to have wider implications concerning the integration of several themes and perspectives often separated in modern thought. Such examples include most notably divisions between theory and practice, justice and love, good and evil, and even religion and politics. More importantly, the close relation between Weil's religious and political agendas reflects the way in which her intellectual achievements were inseparable from her commitment to the common laborer, to the suffering and afflicted. Whilst this

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Practical Deliberation in Simone Weil's Early and Middle Years' in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 43-60, (pp. 43-45). This investigation will be shown not only to reflect Weil's intent to conceptualise her adolescent experiences, but more importantly, address the implications of that experience for human beings, especially the working class and manual labourers.

[105] This basic relationship in Weil's epistemology will be shown to be rooted in the French philosophical tradition, and in particular, with her mentor and tutor, Alain, at the Lycée Henri IV. In addition, her epistemic enterprise will be explored through her dissertation on and use of Descartes' Cartesian philosophy. For further details, see FW, pp. 21-88.

relationship between her metaphysical thoughts and her political and social beliefs are fully examined in the next chapter, for now, her basic premise that aims to establish this relationship is her insistence to relate philosophy to practical life.

Given that Weil is drawn to a belief in the interconnectedness of creation, her 'transcendent kingdom' attempts to close the 'gap' between the elite and the masses, and her epistemic model so far is understood on the basis of a relationship between thought and action, one is certain here that she relentlessly believes that objective, rational knowledge accumulated through pure abstract intellectualism is entirely inadequate. She is inclined, instead, to draw philosophy into human life that spiritually attends to the needs of the soul. But there is another step to take from her approach to doing philosophy. Given that her position is clear on who has access to this unchanging principle, the question that one needs to now ask is how does she go about justifying this position?

Her response has to do with the revelation of human misery. There is a natural alliance, says Weil, between truth and affliction [extreme suffering], because both of them are mute suppliants, eternally condemned to stand speechless in our presence'.[106] Those who are open to truth and proceed justly are far more worthy of respect, according to Weil, than are those of talent, personality or even of traditional genius. 'A village idiot in the literal sense of the world, if he really loves truth, is infinitely superior to Aristotle in his thought, even though he never utters anything else but the supernatural [...] in the domain of thought'.[107] Through this alliance between truth and affliction, the 'village idiot' possesses a greater wisdom than the most talented individual simply by virtue of the idiot's suffering.

This relation of truth to suffering expresses a wider connection, as discussed earlier, between Greek thought and Christianity in Weil's writings. The point to consider here is that her spiritual focus in philosophical reflection expands from simply being a way of life to expressing a deeper reality that is concerned with the presence of God. God is the unchanging principle Weil sees in Plato. Whilst this and other key connections between her use of Greek thought and Christianity are explored later, what appears to be

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[106] MILES, pp. 65-6.
[107] Ibid., p. 67.

an alliance between the material world and the world beyond in her thoughts, materialize here as an irretrievable belief that the experience of suffering is a source of mystical insight.[108] Weil's mysticism represents a direct, intense and implicit consciousness of the divine. Further investigations into her mysticism participate in the development of her understanding and experiences of God. What is important to establish here is that the correlation, for Weil, between truth and suffering in the life of ordinary people reveals to her more and more that because the poor are directly in contact with real life, their suffering bears the reality of the universe. 'The difficulty for him is to look and to love. If he succeeds, he loves the Real. This is the immense privilege God has reserved for his poor'.[109] It appears perfectly clear that, according to Weil, mystical and cognitive insight into the transcendent is not simply reserved for the few, but accessible to all human beings, particularly the common workers and labourers as a result of their suffering. The development of Weil's conception of philosophy from a way of life to mystical insights is fully examined in the next chapter, but in the meantime, this transition is motivated by a deep unwillingness to reject the secular world from the possibilities of what exist beyond it.

The structure of her thoughts, therefore, establish a clear attempt to extrapolate the existential value of abstract ideas that aim to permeate into the world, giving the world a sense of meaning and purpose for all human beings. With this aspect of Weil's thought showing universally the transformative and accessible qualities of philosophical reflection, there is also this mystical orientation in her thinking that takes her insight into the world and human beings to a whole new level. Yet, the elevation of thought and experience in this way begs the question of whether it facilitates her initial philosophical purpose, that is, to employ the practical dimensions of thought that are innately transformative in the lives of individuals.

For now though, her firm belief in the universal accessibility of truth turns the discussion to an assessment of the influences of specific experiences and philosophical movements that assisted with Weil's early intellectual development, and what appears to

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[108] This, as the discussion attempted to address earlier, is associated with Weil's religious experiences between 1937 and 1938. I aim to discuss these events in the second half of chapter III. For further details, see WFG, pp. 64ff.
[109] MILES, p. 272.

have been her sole interest in Descartes' epistemology. An exploration of her interests here will unravel, particularly, the intellectual influence of specific French philosophical traditions during her lifetime, and moreover, her misgivings towards the climate of modern science in early 20th Century France.

2.4 *The Sources of Weil's Vision of Truth*

So far, this chapter has aimed to address the structure of Weil's thoughts through her approach to doing philosophy, identifying in the process, a fundamental belief about the nature of transcendent reality and of God, and more importantly, her relentless commitment to applying this truth to the oppressed and exploited members of society. What obviously requires further development is an assessment of her application of truth to the world. Where this is explored in the next chapter, an initial consideration here has to be given to where this belief in the accessibility of truth originates, followed by how it is associated with her use of and concern with Descartes. Weil's approach to reading Descartes aims to develop a wider discussion of her relationship with Plato, but in order to establish the importance of both philosophers to Weil, and how they facilitate in a later assessment of her ideas and beliefs about truth, a brief account of the origins of her vision of truth needs to be addressed. Generally speaking, though, her deep conviction at fourteen that all human beings are worthy of experiencing absolute truth is pungently addressed in light of her thesis on Descartes, where, in particular, she questions whether modern science, for example, is appropriately linked to the reality and perception of human beings in the material world.[110]

Given that Descartes was one of the principal architects of the very notion of 'scientific thinking' that would aim to give an account of the physical world, Weil considered him to be an appropriate starting point in which to address her concerns towards modern science.[111] But before we can appreciate her use of Descartes, one has to acquire an intellectual perspective as to why Weil was so drawn to Descartes, and moreover, inclined in the first place to tie together the world of theory with the world of matter. To address this task, the discussion now has to turn to a synopsis of her

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[110] FW, pp. 6-7.
[111] Ibid., pp. 23-29.

associations with the French tradition of philosophical reflection as well as her connection to the renowned philosophy professor of the Third Republic at Lycée Henri IV, Émile Chartier.

2.4.1: French Intellectualism as a Source of Weil's Vision of Truth

2.4.1.1: An Overview of French Philosophy in the Late 19th – Early 20th Century

Émile Chartier, commonly known by the pseudonym, *Alain*, was a formidable philosophical figure that had a huge impact upon his pupils at Lycée.[112] He was so influential amongst his pupils that even, the renowned French Existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre, worked hard to avoid attending his lessons in the hope that Alain's influence would not affect his own philosophical concerns.[113] It comes as no surprise then to find that, according to Simone Pétrement, Weil's philosophy began to take shape under Alain's supervision, owing to him 'an essential part of her thought'.[114] But since Weil was already predisposed to expanding her vision from fourteen into the academic community of Lycée, Pétrement is careful to point out that she had already 'chosen her road'. 'The revolt against the social order, the feelings of indignation and severity toward the powers-that-be, the choice of the poor as comrades and companions – all this had not come from Alain'.[115] What then is Alain's influence on the nature of Simone Weil's thoughts?

Broadly speaking, before an outline of Alain's philosophy can take place and his influence on Weil identified, there is an important consideration as to how the nature and stream of French philosophical thought influenced both their intellectual preoccupations. For this very reason, an outline of this thought will not be covered in enormous detail.

At the end of the 19th century, three major currents of thought dominated French philosophy: positivism, idealism and spiritualism.[116] The founder of positivist thinking in

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[112] See P, pp. 25-42.
[113] Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 6. Hereafter, cited as GFP.
[114] P, p. 30.
[115] Ibid.
[116] See GFP, pp. 3-48. See also, Alan D. Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers* (London: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 5-12, 12-16.

France is owed to the 19th century French Philosopher, Auguste Comte.[117] Positivism was a philosophical system of thought that aimed to address the goal of knowledge as merely a description of the facts associated with an event or phenomena experienced. Metaphysical thought was excluded from his epistemic inquiries.[118] At the other end of the philosophical spectrum, Idealism and Spiritualism held that the subject, the human being had precedence over objects in the world. Idealism in France, which originated with the German philosophies of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, constituted the second major movement that held the belief that only mental entities and concepts are real, and that the existence of physical things are nothing more than a matter of them being perceived.[119] But the strong presence of positivism in France at the time meant that French Idealists, Jules Lachlier and Émile Boutroux, for example, took a slightly different route to their associates in Germany, by attempting to show that these natural laws discovered by empirical science are, in fact, governed by *a priori* concepts.[120] They recognized, in other words, the basis of scientific thought in philosophical reflection. Such a synthesis, as Gary Gutting remarks, 'involved exhibiting the limitations of science – indeterminism, absence of finality – that require us to compliment it with metaphysical accounts if we are to describe the full concreteness of reality'.[121] Therefore, the Idealist aimed to exhibit a unified account of philosophy and science though asserting that limitations in scientific thought required the operation of metaphysical concepts that enable the individual mind to actively synthesize what it perceives in the world.

The importance of human thought was equally important for the spiritualist. Comte once remarked that materialism is the belief that the higher – being the mind – can be explained by the lower – matter. Spiritualism takes the opposite view, that is, the lower matter is explained by the higher mind. This movement must not be understood to mean ghosts, or mediums, or anything to do with religious movements; rather, as

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[117] Ibid., pp. 8-11, 37-8; Christian Yves Dupont, *Receptions of Phenomenology in French Philosophy and Religious Thought, 1889-1939*: submitted to Graduate School, Dept. of Theology, the University of Notre Dame, July 1997, pp. 80-90.
[118] See GFP, pp. 8-9; Alexander Gunn, *Modern French Philosophy: A Study of the Development since Comte* (Kensinger Publishing, 2005), pp. 61-90.
[119] GFP, pp. 14-48, 87-8; Christian Yves Dupont, *Receptions of Phenomenology in French Philosophy and Religious Thought, 1889-1939*, pp. 74-6.
[120] Laurent Rollet, 'Poincaré's Conventionalism and French Philosophy at the Turn of the Century', *Third International History of Philosophy of Science Conference HOPOS 2000* (Vienne, juillet 2000), pp. 1-3.
[121] GFP, pp. 25-6.

Christian Dupont points out, it refers to philosophies centered upon the interior life of the individual subject understood as spontaneous, active and creative.[122] A tradition that evolved during the late 19th and early 20th century, spiritualism is concerned with the inner reality of the human being and its capacity to act in view of that reality. Spiritualism, like idealism, is willing to adopt synthetic methodologies in order to acquire true knowledge of how a human being comes to understand and perceive the world.[123]

2.4.1.2: **Alain and the Philosophers of Spiritualism**

In a nutshell, this *spiritueliste* line of French Philosophy which is concerned with the importance of the subject, and the relationship between thought and action, established the basis wherein Alain's philosophical motifs developed. Broadly speaking, his philosophy was heavily influenced by ancient and modern philosophical thought – from Plato to Descartes, Kant, Maine de Biran, Jules Lachelier, and his own predecessor, Jules Lagneau.[124] But the premise in which his philosophy evolved is owed particularly to the latter three French philosophers. Before these connections and comparisons are addressed, however, it is important to closely assess the nature of spiritualism and Alain's relationship to this movement, all within the wider movement of European philosophical reflection, in order to show the importance of his contributions to Weil's writings.

The basis of Alain's use of several prominent philosophers from the ancient and modern philosophical world suggest that he belonged to what McFarland sees as a much larger movement of thought the French call the 'philosophies of reflection'.[125] Furthermore, with there being close connections between French spiritualism and idealism, and French idealists, like Lachelier, who were inclined to incorporate spiritualist aspects of thought into their philosophy, it would be unsurprising to find that

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[122] Christian Yves Dupont, *Receptions of Phenomenology in French Philosophy and Religious Thought, 1889-1939*, pp. 86-8.
[123] GFP, p. 9-14; Alexander Gunn, *Modern French Philosophy: A Study of the Development since Comte*, pp. 90-3.
[124] P, pp. 30-4. 'Alain had occupied a central position in France's intellectual life for over a generation, and more than forty years after his death, he is still known to every student of a French Lycée. He was a polemicist, an outspoken Dreyfusard, a pacifist, a member of France's Radical party of petit bourgeois reformers. He was also an outsider, proud of his Norman roots, always content despite his eminence to remain an instructor at a preparatory school'. See T Nevin, *The Portrait of A Self-Exiled Jew*, pp. 39-40; and D. McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist*, p. 12.
[125] See Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 20.

Alain might embody a similar assimilation of ideas within his own philosophical enterprise. Though further evidence of this will be addressed in light of his influence on Weil, his particular intellectual admiration for Lagneau and Lachelier, who both expressed this close relationship between the two movements, appears to justify this initial predisposition towards Alain's own philosophical outlook.[126]

In the meantime, however, when McFarland uses this phrase, 'philosophies of reflection', she does so in order to draw the reader's attention to the mental grid of Alain's philosophy, that is, how his association with the spiritualist movement governs the direction of his own intellectual concerns.[127] In addition, her use of this phrase helps to establish the French philosophical movement in a much broader context of what it means to do philosophy, and how epistemic, philosophical concerns outside of France were taking their toll, academically, within France. In more precise terms, however, the phrase, 'philosophies of reflection', alludes to traditions of reflective philosophy, that is, philosophies which attempt to show that through the act of thought, an individual's mind is intimately related to the realm of Being, i.e. to thought itself.[128] Under this umbrella of reflective philosophy, French spiritualism particularly moved away from other historical philosophical movements that promote, for example, the idea that the act of thought and thought itself are somehow incommensurable, belonging to separate and distinct levels of reality. As McFarland sees it, several philosophies such as these use the Realm of Being to somehow devalue things of the material world. Such philosophical concerns have led to a production of dualisms such as mind/body, essence/existence and thought/action where the latter terms in each case have become inferior in philosophical thought.[129]

The French spiritualists, as already mentioned, take a different line on reflective philosophy. With reference to the above dualisms, the 'body', 'existence' and 'action', for example, are integral to the importance they place upon their defense of the subject (rather than the object outside) and the living of corresponding experiences of thought.[130] The one responsible for attempting, in short, to fuse the mind/body, thought/action split, within the movement of French spiritualism, falls at the feet of Maine de Biran. Biran's

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[126] See Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, pp. 22-23.
[127] Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 21.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] GFP, pp. 13-14.

basic argument was that the mind is essentially active and synthetic rather than passive, which suggested for him at least that life was active and dynamic.[131] Biran, therefore, supposed that 'It is the "I" who moves or who *wills* to move, and it is also "I" who am moved. Here are the two terms of the relation which are required to ground the first simple judgment of personality, "I am"'.[132] The autonomous 'I am' is an expression of the autonomy of the individual that moves away from the idea that a person's physical existence is reduced to externally caused sensations that are inter-connected with the mental activity. In other words, the consciousness of the 'autonomous will' is that of *personal* existence distinct from the existence of a merely *sensual* being. De Biran's doctrine of effort, as McFarland calls it, has the subject's will at the center of true knowledge.[133]

In an attempt to bridge these dualisms, Lagneau attempted to learn not about the way in which scientific laws governed the appearance of objects in the world, independently of the subject, but to recognize how objects are comprised by the subjective faculties of the human being.[134] In other words, Lagneau was calling for an active synthesis of objects within the individual mind, that is, how the mind acts in such a way that it generates various perceptions of objects existing in the world. Lagneau argues hat in order for the self, the thinking consciousness, to know itself, it cannot depend on the activity of the mind alone, but on the mind's relation to the body, and the actual movement of the body to act in the world. 'The self, in other words, "knows itself only in the action which it experiences on the exterior world"'.[135]

The primacy of willing thought is so influential in the French reflective tradition that Alain, a pupil of Lagneau, (who in turn was tutored by de Biran) makes the reality of the act of reflective thought – which was simply to will – not only dependent on the mind alone, but on the translation of thought into action. The will, says Alain, 'involves the

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[131] Christian Yves Dupont, *Receptions of Phenomenology in French Philosophy and Religious Thought, 1889-1939*, pp. 45-7.
[132] Maine de Biran, *Journal Intime,* Vol. II, ed. H. Gouhier (Paris, 1954-7), p. 188 & pp. 389f; see also F. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, Vol. IX (London: Search Press, 1975), p. 33. Hereafter, cited as FC.
[133] Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, pp. 21-22.
[134] Christian Yves Dupont, p. 82.
[135] J. Lagneau, *Célèbres lecons et fragments, deuxième ed., revue et augmentée,* (Paris: Presses Universitairies de France, 1964), p. 194.

entire life of the mind [...]. The will does not exist except in action'.[136] At the point of connecting Alain's own philosophical orientation towards spiritualism, and indeed, to its founder in de Biran, the discussion now moves to identifying a common theme that ties these philosophical movements together. Since these movements were closely related to one another through their similarities and differences, and subject to constant re-evaluations over time, it is difficult to categorize Alain, and particularly Weil, solely to any one movement because the diversity of their intellectual inquiries and beliefs meant that they often fluctuated between different camps of thought.[137] Addressing a common theme between these movements will help to focus forthcoming discussions on Weil, but moreover, illustrate the diversity of influences on each of their intellectual preoccupations.

2.4.1.3: **French Philosophy: Moving from Theory to Practice**

So far, this section has addressed the philosophical reflective tradition in France, though not by any means in substantial detail. The aim has been to establish a philosophical perspective in French thought that will support Alain's influence on Weil, and in addition, illustrate the background of Weil's system of thought. What has already been noted as her intellectual reservations against modern science and their assertion of the epistemic dominance of nature over and above the subjective faculties of the individual is clearly expressed in this French philosophical pathway from positivism to idealism and spiritualism.

Earlier, Comte's 'Positivism' addressed the movements of a pure materialism where mental life is reduced to the flow of passing sense experiences. Metaphysical hypotheses are avoided. Lachelier's idealism addressed the importance of philosophical reflection in modern science so that science and metaphysics are synthesized into a complete whole. With his inclination, however, to appreciate the affinity between spiritualism and idealism, Lagneau's and Main de Biran's spiritualism go the extra distance by asserting the primacy of the will and action that reveals a persistent self or mind determining the ultimate autonomy and value of a human being in the world. What

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[136] P, p. 32.
[137] See, for example, FW, pp. 7-8.

closely ties together the idealist and spiritualist approach is the supremacy of the mind over matter, though there are two clear and distinct assertions concerning the spiritualist position. Firstly, the value of human existence derives from the higher mental faculties of persons, and secondly, that these faculties are not reducible to material processes such as sense experience (empiricism) nor assembled together to establish a higher level of reality (Idealism). Spiritualism thus asserts the metaphysical dominance of the individual mind.

The end of section 2.4.1.2 alludes to this dominance, which, in conjunction with the common associations between French spiritualism and idealism, is a prominent feature of Alain's philosophy. Moreover, as the movement of 'positivism' altered significantly after Comte, there is even the suggestion that Alain's thought, like that of the leading French Idealist in France at the time, Léon Brunschvicg, fused together positivism and idealism.[138] Though there is no space here to consider how these movements considered together and apart from one another appear to influence Alain's, and indeed, Weil's thought in some way, there is one fundamental theme that clearly ties both of them to all of these movements together. For the spiritualist, idealist and the positivism idealist, the relationship between science and philosophy or thought and action, is fundamentally concerned with the full concreteness of reality, that is, the movement from theory to practice. This has already been addressed in relation to Lagneau, de Biran and Lachelier.

All in all, this brings to light the source of Alain's intellectual inspiration. French spiritualism, in addition to how the French reflective tradition generally considered the importance of intellectually transforming theory into practice, leads to an opportunity now to present a brief, but clear exposition of several continuous spiritualist themes running through Alain's philosophy, and indeed, Weil's writings.

2. 4. 2: Alain's Philosophy of Thought and Action

What might come as a surprise to many is that spiritualism is rooted in Descartes' assertion of the epistemic and metaphysical supremacy of thought.[139] It comes as no

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[138] GFP, pp. 42-3; Alexander Gunn, *Modern French Philosophy*, pp. 25-30.
[139] GFP, pp. 9-10.

surprise then to find that Alain, like Descartes, recognized the difference between the mind and matter, and went even so far as to suggest that the 'mind was in the world but definitely not of the world'. 'Only a mind which knew itself to be utterly distinct from the world could perceive correctly'.[140] In that case, like Lagneau, Alain placed great importance on the nature of perception, emphasizing how action in the world enables the mind to actively comprehend, connect and make coherent its relationships in the world. The main obstacle to pure perception for Alain was, as Ravaisson argued, the lower forms of mental expression – sense-perception and passionate emotions.[141] These were not subject to reason. What is needed, according to Alain, is attention towards higher mental functions such as the will. Giving attention to the will would enable the mind to control the functions of the body, and in the process, establish the correct use of reason. 'Reason must be willed'. The importance of the will, nevertheless, has several implications for Alain that concern the nature of morality, action and intelligence.[142]

On action and morality, de Biran, for example, identifies the relationship between subjective interiority and the exteriority of the physical world on the basis of the individual will in action.[143] He, therefore, strongly disagreed with the political philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's view of the intrinsic goodness of the individual. Whilst the individual is naturally inclined towards the value of happiness, de Biran believed that ultimately the whole idea of morality is not founded on innate ideas as Rousseau maintained, but rather through action on the will. Therefore, 'all our ideas are acquisitions; there are no innate ideas of right and wrong, good and bad'.[144] Like de Biran, Alain believed that exercising the will means that above all one has a duty to oneself. When a person fulfils this self-duty he or she is compelled to due their duty to others. According to his supreme individualism, duty, says Alain, is defined by freedom (self-mastery). There is no 'moral law that is imposed externally on man'.[145] Therefore, an idea such as a moral law is never true in itself independently of the person who is doing the thinking. The existence of principles and forms that the person asserts 'come

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[140] FW, pp. 23-4. See also, T. Zeldin, *France 1848-1945: Intellect and Pride*, pp. 215-16.
[141] GFP, pp. 10-12.
[142] P, pp. 32-34.
[143] Alexander Gunn, pp. 90-2.
[144] FC, p. 32.
[145] P, p. 34.

from [it] and not from things'.[146] In spite of believing in the idea that duty is not defined by an external law, but rather, by an inner disposition, Alain held to the existence of an exterior world simply because 'the mind can only think by perceiving; it thinks only that which exists'.[147] The implication of the mind perceiving an external world suggests that he recognized the importance of action in the world as a means of knowledge of the thinking self, and therefore, what he clearly recognized as a world of value.

On intelligence, exercising the will meant that no-one presumed to be more intelligent than anyone else: 'it was all a question of will-power' and application. This was particularly his philosophical methodology towards teaching. Even on matters of religious or political allegiance, he was emphatic that once a choice was made or given, 'on must stick to it and should strive to make it good. It in this that the will consists [...]'.[148] In short then, Alain's exposition on the will asserts the importance of not only the activity of thought itself but the all important transformation of thought into action, for it the person who commits to this that he or she is able to recognize a world of value. Value and intelligence is manifested through action in the world.

Immediately, Weil's belief in the universal accessibility of transcendent reality is comparable here to Alain's belief of how the will existing only in action promotes an equal intelligence amongst all individuals. There are no matters of distinction amongst individuals that exercise their will appropriately. Furthermore, it was Alain's emphasis on the will in action and, in particular, morality that were particularly attractive to Weil. Through two remarkable essays entitled *Grimm's Fairy Tale of Six Swans* and *The Beautiful and the Good,* which she wrote for Alain during her first year at Henri IV, Weil expands her spiritualist philosophy into a meditation upon the world of value and meaning.[149] In order to consider this meditation, one has to assess her essays and address them in the light of her own philosophical orientation not to mention her affinity to the French spiritualist movement.

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[146] Ibid., p. 35.
[147] Ibid., p. 33.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid., p. 37.

2. 4. 3: Weil's Meditation on the World of Value

Briefly, the essay, *The Beautiful and the Good*, tells the story of Alexander's decision to refuse a cask of water which was brought to him while he and his army, both of whom were suffering from thirst, were marching across a desert. Weil interprets this act through Alain and de Biran's spiritualism of morality. That is to say, Alexander's act does not conform 'to this or that rule but is a free, unpredictable act'. Moreover, his duty to himself coincided with his duty to his soldiers.[150]

Her second essay, *Grimm's Fairy Tale of Six Swans*, however, tells the story of a young woman whose six brothers were each turned into swans by a witch. The young lady had to spin and sew six nightshirts out of white anemones in order to restore them to their true selves. During her work she was forbidden to speak. The result of her silence, though, exposes her to many false accusations to which she cannot reply, and it is only when she is just about to be sent to the gallows, that the six swans appear. She throws the shirts over the six swans and they are restored to their former selves. Weil understands this story to illustrate how non-action is an act of pure abstention brought about by the activity of thought turning towards and being illuminated by the world of value. In this case with the young woman sworn to silence, the incarnation of thought into action is an act of pure abstention.[151]

Her primary focus in both essays appears to be a concern for and attention towards the world of value, which she aims to relate to the material world. In both essays, the world of value for Weil is represented by her passion for the good. The good is the basis whereby she attempts to apprehend an understanding of the material world, and where she conceives the possibility of transforming it. What appears, however, to be even more illuminating here is the degree to which Alain's influence and the influence of spiritualist thought emerges in Weil's writings. Alexander's freedom to act in *The Beautiful and the Good* epitomizes Alain's morality of extreme individualism, that is, how the act of duty to oneself coincides with an act of duty to others. Alexander commits to the transformation of thought into action through an exercise of his will, but with Weil's attention clearly on the immaterial world, his action symbolizes an act of purity to

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[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.

oneself. But there is a further dimension to this story, which concerns Alexander's action towards his soldiers. This action brings us back to earlier discussions that addressed Weil's determination to stand on the side of the slave. Though Pétrement affirms, for example, that Weil's choice of the poor as comrades and companions was not influenced by Alain's teachings, there are innate characteristics between them that such otherwise. For example, whilst it is necessary for Alexander to save himself, to save the Spirit within himself, his sacrifice for his soldiers is an acceptance of pain. This is, as Weil argues, 'the refusal to obey the animal in oneself, and the will to redeem suffering men through voluntary suffering'.[152] But, according to Pétrement, Alain also 'admired voluntary suffering. For instance, he considered beautiful and human the custom of the savage who imposes suffering on himself while his wife is giving birth'.[153] Their connection here within the context of voluntary suffering shows how Alain and Weil were in principle committed to a world of meaning that in both cases reflected in their commitment to humanity. Alain's morality, in that sense, facilitated Weil's direction to follow her own passion for the good. Such passion which expresses her world of value is particularly apparent in the second story. Not only does the young woman's pure act of non-action epitomize this supernatural world, but the principle of the story firmly corresponds to her predecessor and French spiritualist thought at large.

2. 4. 4: Identifying the World of Value

The principle that Weil draws out from the second story is how a deeper understanding of the world of value emerges through a pure act of non-action. More importantly, however, Weil's intention here to relate, through this action, the immaterial with the material world, addresses the importance of how the nature of an action is the result of a corresponding thought that has turned away from the world in order to contemplate its relationship to the immaterial world. For spiritualism, the significance given to thought represents, if one recalls, the mind utilizing the higher mental functions. Without this utilization action, says Weil, is never difficult: 'we [then] always act too much and scatter

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[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.

ourselves ceasely in disorderly deeds'.[154] Alain makes a similar point towards the principle of non-action. Praising purity in human conduct, Alain also praised the person that resisted the most from acting in the external world, saying, for instance, 'to think is to keep from acting, and that methodical experimentation, as opposed to blind experience, consists in acting as little as possible'.[155] Thus, the thrust of spiritualism and its focus on the higher mental faculties of pure perception passes through these essays. Furthermore, though, their focus on higher mental faculties suggest that both Alain's, and moreover, Weil's spiritualist philosophy were sympathetic to the idealist cause. Both appear to be particularly concerned with the nature of thought itself. As Weil believed that it had to move away from this world in order to turn towards the world of value, Alain believed in a sharp distinction and separation of the mind from the material world, and that the development of correct perception is only possible when the mind is understood as entirely distinct and separate from the world.

In that case, what makes thought so important is its attachment to a corresponding metaphysical pretext. Thinking in this fashion means that the incarnation of thought into action makes the action worthwhile, coherent and constructive, thereby enabling the mind to understand its relationships and establish what is primarily universal to all human beings in the world. While the status of the mind for Alain and Weil justifies the impression that both expressed a tendency to idealism, the emphasis on this nature of thinking traversing into action, particularly with Weil, aligns them intellectually to the stream of spiritualism. In short, spiritualism aims, 'first, to describe 'accurately and in detail, our experience of ourselves as spiritual beings; and second, to show that everything else (including the realm of nature) is subordinated to and dependent on spirit'.[156] The spiritualist premise that all things are fundamentally dependent upon spirit corresponds with Weil's attention to the world of value, and why she is so intent on relating it to the material world. Moreover, her commitment to this process is driven by her innate conviction, as discussed earlier, that the world of value is widely accessible to ordinary citizens of society, particularly the suffering of the marginalized.

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[154] Ibid., p. 38.
[155] Ibid., p. 36.
[156] GFP, pp. 11-13.

What appears to emerge from this discussion so far on the intellectual background of Simone Weil is how Alain's philosophy and the French spiritualist movement have come to emerge as a crucial part and influence on the structure of her mind. The two essays for Alain characterize this development. The structure of her experiences, however, align with the political and social realities of her day, that is, her commitment to voluntary suffering, self-sacrifice and standing alongside the poor and afflicted. Unbeknown to Weil at the time, *The Beautiful and the Good* would in fact foreshadow her entire life and emerge powerfully within her intellectual alliance with Descartes. But before the discussion moves into this arena, one has to briefly overview the investigation so far on the structure of Weil's thinking. In light of her spiritualist conviction to incarnate thought into action, forthcoming discussions examine whether this initial conviction continues throughout her writings, or, given the stark contrast between her vision of the world of value and her apprehension towards the material world, her thoughts (assimilated to a higher level of reality) become her only source of reality (idealism).

Alternatively stated, the direction in which this juxtaposition between thought and experience is taken can be addressed in terms of the underlying premise of her essays. Do the life and writings of Simone Weil reflect the spiritualism of *Grimm's Fairy Tale of Six Swans*, that is, a pure being committed to act through its mere existence, where, for example, in spite of the circumstances and events of the young woman justice did prevail through her act of abstention? Or alternatively, do they reflect the rather idealist position of *The Beautiful and the Good*, that is, Alexander commits to an ideal act, to act for the good, through voluntary suffering and self-sacrifice? The suggestion so far is that Weil is committed to the testimony of the latter story whereupon her thoughts, orientated towards the ideal of the good, traverse in and through her actions. The issue that arises from this commitment is whether her relentless alliance with the misfortunate overshadowed her capacity to act from the relation of her thoughts directed towards the world of value. Put another way, one has to examine if Weil's deepened experiences of social and political oppression overshadowed her ability or even her capacity to illuminate the material world with her world of meaning and value? The view taken in this thesis that an innate dualistic trend transpires within her thinking, suggests that it did infringe on her ability to

fulfill her primary intellectual vocation. One will explore a little further, in the next section on Descartes, whether she intellectually leans more towards the story of *The Beautiful and the Good* or *Grimm's Fairy Tale of Six Swans.*

2.5 *Weil's 'Science et perception dans Descartes'*

With the translation of her dissertation from a collection of essays entitled *Sur la science* and incorporated into a collection of works entitled *Formative Writings*, *Science et perception* is a proposed evaluation of the foundations of modern science through the work of Descartes. Where Weil initially expressed her agitation with Aristotle's philosophy because it appears to be incompatible with her belief in personal sacrifice and in an active commitment on behalf of others, she now turns this same agitation towards modern science.[157] But this agitation, remember, originates from her adolescent crisis that intellectual elitists are not the only ones that have access to transcendental reality. In short, what she attempts to do here is to fuse together the conviction of her crisis with an earlier discussion of the stream of thought that had been passed on to her by Alain and the French spiritualist movement. The aim, therefore, is to assess, through Descartes, what epistemic justification she gives to support her belief in the universal accessibility of the realms of truth, and why the ordinary person is an ideal that is capable of expressing transcendental truth.

Weil's essay on Descartes is divided into three principal sections; an 'introduction', followed by two parts. The first part is an historical assessment, and an alternative viewpoint, of how the development of modern science corresponds to familiar aspects of Cartesian thought, whilst the second part is an account of Weil's use of the Cartesian method in order to elucidate the foundations of true knowledge.[158] At the beginning of *Science and Perception* she reflects both upon the crisis amongst ordinary human beings that have always found the 'higher kind of thought' in 'priests and kings that appear to be godlike'.[159] At the same time, however, her antithetical vision comes in the advent of the Greek mathematician and Astronomer, Thales of Miletus, and his

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[157] See, for example, Michael Ross, 'Transcendence, Immanence, and Practical Deliberation in Simone Weil's Early and Middle Years', in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, 43-60, (pp. 54-6).
[158] See FW, pp. 36-55, 55-86.
[159] Ibid., pp. 31-2.

discovery of theorems in elementary geometry that utilizes ordinary thinking. The legacy of Thales overthrows the illusion of elite authorities that claim to have unique access to the higher realms.[160] But the aftermath of her vision proceeds with her identification of another crisis, where once again, ordinary thought from the ordinary individual is subordinated by another authority. On this occasion and during Weil's lifetime, the godlike status of a priest is replaced by the godlike status afforded to a scientist. In short, 'scientists exclude everything having to do with intuition; they no longer admit anything into science except the most abstract form of reasoning, expressed [...] by means of algebraic signs. Scientists have thus indeed become the successors of the priests'.[161]

Part I of her essay, therefore, focuses on traditional interpretations of Descartes. That is to say, Descartes the dualist who rejects the human senses as elusively deceptive, and Descartes the scientist who adopts the use of reason alone in which to clearly understand the natural world. Utilizing her resources from Alain's teachings and the corresponding stream of French spiritualism, she recognizes Descartes not only as the original founder of modern science, but also affirms the belief that his view of the epistemic supremacy of thought is at the root of spiritualism.[162] Despite, therefore, his prominent status in the development of philosophical idealism that modern science has sufficiently adopted as the mental grid of its thinking, Weil brings another aspect of his thought that is far removed from the view that he is just an extreme idealist. Descartes combined, according to Weil's readings, an extreme idealism with an extreme realism because he appeared unwilling to totally reject the reality of the sensible world. He 'wants to know the world as it is in itself'.[163] As with her adolescent experience, what is interesting about her findings in relation to Descartes is that he is willing to seek out an application for science accessible to all human beings.

She notes, for example, that he was 'not only [in] his last years completely dedicated to medical science (which he regarded as the only suitable means of making the majority of men wiser, as well as healthier), but, much more, it was only with a view to their applications that he took the trouble to communicate his speculations to the

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[160] Ibid., p. 32.
[161] Ibid., p. 34.
[162] Ibid., p. 23.
[163] Ibid., p. 39.

public'.[164] The upshot of Weil's interpretation here is that science, for Descartes, is expected to conform to the mind rather than to things. Descartes' assertion presupposes that too much of the time scientific thought has exclusively focused on the production of results through its investigative studies of nature that fail in the process 'to make it sufficiently clear to the mind why these things are so, and how they were discovered' in the first place.[165] In other words, this way of doing science, which Descartes addresses, for example, towards classical geometry, 'does not give entire satisfaction to the minds of those who want to learn, because it does not teach the method by which the thing was discovered'.[166] In that case, Descartes' science, Weil argues, 'is not at all a matter of thinking conveniently but of thinking well, that is, by directing one's thought properly'. There is, unlike traditional Cartesian science, 'no inequality either among the sciences or among minds'.[167]

As Alain and the spiritualists emphasized the importance of using reason correctly in order that perception is pure and correct, Weil sees in Descartes how real science is open to everyone simply because science requires just the correct use of reason. Thus, it appears that while Descartes, on the one hand, is an extreme idealist, he is, according to Weil, also a realist, showing in the process that Cartesian thought is considerably more of a concrete living reality. The consequence of this original reading is that Descartes' enterprise is subject to several contradictory views. Weil realizes that the historical approach taken above will not be sufficiently adequate to reconcile them. Rather, she will need to become temporarily 'a Cartesian' in order to re-think Descartes method of doubt and pursue a series of personal reflections in part two of her essay that constitute her own epistemological quest.[168]

Weil attempts, like Descartes set about in his *Meditations*, to doubt everything that is potentially subject to the world of illusion, but she does so with the overall premise of her essay that begins: 'humanity began with no knowledge except consciousness of

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[164] Ibid., p. 44.
[165] See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indiana: Hackett, 1998), p. 23.
[166] René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays*, ed. Roger Arview (Indiana: Hackett, 2000), pp. 2ff.
[167] FW, p. 48.
[168] Ibid., pp. 53-55.

self and perception of the world'.[169] In a prolonged meditation that gets back to this essential property of humanity, consciousness is stripped of every illusion, for example, every feeling of pleasure, pain, sensation, and even, abstract ideas such as mathematical propositions. These experiences all tend to be the product of illusion. But where Descartes reached a degree of certainty of himself only by knowing that he was a thinking being – hence the *cogito*, 'I think, therefore I am',[170] Weil reaches a rather different conclusion with regards to consciousness. Through her process of doubting, and continued reflection, Weil comes to realize that consciousness in itself, in terms of establishing genuine knowledge of the real existence of what she is conscious of in the external world, fails to show that it is not the product of illusion. In other words, Weil is attempting to establish true knowledge that is not concerned with what a person thinks as such because she recognizes that thoughts are capable of deceiving the individual, thereby creating illusion. What is not an illusion, however, is the activity involved in being able to think in the ways that a person does in the first place.[171]

In other words, Weil's method of doubting did not lead to the certainty that Descartes reached with thought itself, but rather, through a being that has the *power* to think. Hence, 'I have power, therefore I am'. Thus, 'to exist, to think, to know are only aspects of a single reality: to be able to do something. [...] From the moment that I do something, I cause myself to exist'.[172] A person is defined by what he or she can do, and one can know oneself to the extent in which he or she can exercise this power. But this determination of her basic existence is short lived. As quickly as Weil affirms the certainty of her existence in relation to her power over her thoughts, she addresses the limitation of that power in view of the existence of an external world. What then enables Weil to connect her mind with the world?

2.6 *Connecting the Mind to the External World*

Having separated herself from the world and from the possible illusions of sense experience in order to determine genuine knowledge by pure understanding, Weil wishes

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[169] Ibid., p. 31.
[170] For a very good discussion of Descartes' *Cogito*, see Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 29-39.
[171] FW, pp. 56-7.
[172] Ibid., p. 59.

to identify the connection between her mind and the external world. To do this, she turns to the imagination as the bond of 'action and reaction' that attaches the person to the world.[173] Having known everything that is possible to know by pure understanding, she no longer has to 'suspend the imagination'; rather, as she says, 'I can give it free reign so that I may learn from it'.[174] In that sense, the imagination is not just the connection between Weil's mind and the external world, but also an 'instrument' that aims to teach her about the world. As she says, the nature of imagination 'shows me either the presence of an external world that I cannot comprehend, or my grasp on that world'.[175] In order, therefore, to learn about the world, Weil decides 'to put questions to the imagination' in order 'to distinguish when it is speaking the truth'.[176] As she embarks along this path of inquiry, she uncovers that it is in fact comprised of a double reality.

Since the imagination plays a role in thoughts, she finds that its dual roles are the result of the relationship between the imagination and the mind. The 'uncontrollable imagination', says Weil, signals a break between the imagination and the mind so that passions and sensations forcibly impose themselves on the individual, making it passive and impotent.[177] The 'controlled imaginations' are under the supervision of the mind, which means that the imagination is guided by the mind to facilitate the deployment of clear ideas without the world, as Weil puts it, encroaching on her, since they are made present to her by an act of her own attention.[178] Here, the imagination enables her to get a grasp of the world. But this immediately begs the question: how does one connect the one part of the imagination guided by the mind with the other part of the imagination subject to the reign of sense impressions and the passions? Weil argues that these two aspects of imagination are united together by the mediation of work and perception. Perception, she says, is 'geometry taking as it were possession of the passions themselves, by means of work'. With perception actively controlling the imagination, it turns sensations into signs of 'work I may do'.[179] And it is work in itself, that is, thought detached from the passions and applied to action in the world, that enables Weil to observe the world as it is in itself,

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[173] Ibid., pp. 60-2.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid., p. 63.
[176] Ibid., pp. 63-4.
[177] Ibid., pp. 70-1.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid., pp. 78-9.

'stripped of all admixture of mind, all trappings of imagination'.[180] Work juxtaposed with perception then is the key to mastering the disordered imagination, thereby gradually coming to know and understand sensible reality.

At long last, Weil returns to her original hypothesis, which was to understand the true nature of science. But before concluding her findings and their implications, one ought to summarize what this discussion has uncovered so far. Firstly, the reader is reminded that she had a serious contention with modern science and, secondly, that this contention required a re-evaluation of Descartes' thought and traditional Cartesian science. Her aim was to understand the true nature of science because scientific thought, through its own prejudices, had evidently removed itself not only from ordinary thought, but through its reasoning, became increasingly abstract and detached from the sensible world. Modern science, in other words, failed to give expression to the true nature of science itself. By addressing this issue, Weil had a much deeper priority to revive the inner life of the human being with the same degree of integrity as scientific thought. In that case, setting about to establish a connection between scientific and ordinary thought, she turns to an original analysis of Descartes' thought. Far from strictly being a philosophical idealist, he in fact, according to Weil, combined philosophical idealism with philosophical realism with the aim that science has to conform to the mind. But, in spite of the fact that he failed to trust the senses, this did not infer that he rejected the sensible world altogether. For example, as Weil employs the use of the imagination in the second part of her essay in order to connect the mind with the sensible world, Descartes shows that his Cartesian geometry is never separated from the imagination for 'the mind engaged in geometry makes use of the imagination'.[181] 'It grasps something' in order that geometric propositions formed in the mind are based on objects in the material world. Nevertheless, the finest testament of Weil's entire analysis of Descartes' approach to science, in particular, the applications of science, is her discovery that there is no separation between scientific and ordinary thought in Cartesian science.

As Weil, Alain and the spiritualists all attended to the supremacy of thought and the importance of correct thinking, Descartes 'regards every mind, as soon as it makes a

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[180] Ibid., p. 80.
[181] Ibid., p. 45.

serious effort to think properly, as equal to the greatest genius'.[182] There is a 'common wisdom', he says, that is much closer to authentic philosophy than the 'kind of thinking that study produces'. Incidentally, Descartes citation here of the importance of effort in order to think correctly, not only becomes Weil's verifying principle in the form of 'power' – the final result of her method of doubting in part II – but how the mind is connected to the sensible world through the importance of effort and imagination for Descartes and the importance of work and perception on the imagination for Weil. Yet, from this original reading of Descartes and her conclusion that work and perception is the point at which the mind connects with the world, what then is the true nature of science?

The answer has to do with the conclusions of the first and second part of her essay. With regards to the first part, Weil illustrates from her reading of Descartes that perception itself is of the same nature as science. Perception, which is 'solely an inspection of the mind', is an act of the understanding, that is, making judgments and drawing conclusions. Science amounts to the same thing, which means that it merely amounts to accurate perception, thereby making it accessible to everyone rather than a select few. Weil's conclusion of the second part elucidates this point further. Perception like geometry, she argues, is taking control of the passions by means of work, and work if one recalls, is detached thought applied to action in the sensible world. She concludes, in short, that the nature of science is work and perception – the real purpose of science is indistinguishable from the real purpose of work because science, like work, is the essential link between the mind and the external world, and where, ultimately speaking, the mind is the supreme master that accurately and correctly perceives the reality of the sensible world. And this is what the worker has to realize in its work. Once it recognizes the true nature of work, it achieves the same degree of elevated thought as the scientist.

Broadly speaking then, the summation of her argument in *Science et perception* has been to epistemologically establish what the spiritualist, Felix Ravaisson foresaw as a philosophy that gives priority to spiritual 'facts' in the same way that ordinary positivism, for example, gives to scientific facts. Simone Weil shows indirectly that Ravaisson's prediction was correct when her thesis, as the discussion has attempted to elucidate, argues that ordinary perception and work are of the same nature and value as scientific

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[182] See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. Donald A. Cress, pp. 109-110.

and other forms of specialized and elitist knowledge. In that sense, there is no separation between knowledge of the world (science) and knowledge of the realm of meaning and value (metaphysics). Science and metaphysics are entirely commensurable. Where Weil argues that Descartes has been misunderstood for being exclusively responsible for the gulf between these realms, she produces an original reading that is uniquely suitable to recognizing how he perceived the ordinary person in relation to both the sensible world and the world of value.[183] In particular, a wider and more accessible use of science and reflective philosophy intends to establish the element of correct thinking in the ordinary person, particularly the worker. With this structure to thought that is appropriate in the context of work alone, Weil is aiming to turn a worker into a thinker, but not just any thinker, rather a person who thinks without passion and immediate gratification. In other words, a person, through the scope of reflective thought, that is able to live a value-orientated existence.

This conclusion to *Science et perception* is concerned to establish an ideal reality for ordinary individuals, which incidentally, corresponds with the theme of her earlier essay, *The Beautiful and the Good*. They both aim to illuminate her preoccupation with the 'ideal man' and her belief in the universal accessibility of true knowledge. But the issue addressed at the end of the previous sub-section – whether or not Weil, through her thoughts, is so absorbed into the world of value that she fails to adequately relate this world with the material world – re-surfaces in light of what has been uncovered in *Science et perception*. The Weil scholar, Peter Winch, on *Science et perception*, indirectly alludes to the problem that her original insight into Descartes' *cogito*, that is, the determination of a person's existence through the application of power, does not necessarily appear to be strictly in tune with the approach of her spiritualist predecessors.[184] Assessing this issue, in addition to earlier issues with her essays for Alain will help to further elucidate at this stage whether her thought incarnated into action, and, within the nature of her thinking, the immaterial world truly related to the material world.

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[183] LP, pp. 122-123.
[184] LP, pp. 5-7.

2.7 *The Implications of 'Science et perception'*

The discussion now turns to the last area of inquiry for this chapter. The aim is to briefly address some concerns that relate to her dissertation, in particular, how evident at this stage is this apparent connection between thought and action in Weil's writings.

Earlier assessments aimed to identify two main sources that contributed to Weil's thesis on Descartes. Again, these sources reflect what has initially been examined as the innate alternation between thought and experience in Weil and in French spiritualism. Firstly, an earlier discussion on the experiential source of her vision of truth addressed her spiritual autobiographical writings from *Waiting for God*. Here, she describes in detail her adolescent crisis occasioned by the mathematical brilliance of her brother.[185] What she draws from this experience is the conviction that no one, no matter how inferior their mental faculties was excluded from the 'realm of truth reserved for genius'.

Secondly, for Weil, the wave of modern science that had intellectually overshadowed the philosophical community of France by attempting to assert scientific truth as a lucid, superior form of knowledge, unjustifiably subordinated natural intuition and commonsense. This stance with the additional weight of the first point, that is, her attempts to raise the average person to the platform of metaphysical thought is, according to Ernst Curtis, a writer on German idealism in the 1930s, French philosophical reflection surrendering the very nature of philosophy to 'average intelligence'.[186] Unlike German idealism, which the French understood as an attempt to swamp the freedom of the individual with the all-prevailing reality of the absolute, French philosophical thought was concerned to ground its inquiries as a concrete, living reality.

This philosophical distinctiveness has been shown to be very much ingrained in the framework of Weil's dissertation on Descartes. But how ingrained is this particular approach to philosophy in Weil's essay is open to debate. The Weil scholar, Peter Winch, brings to mind a problem that one clearly sees with her essay, *The Beautiful and the*

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[185] WFG, pp. 63-4.
[186] Ernst Curtis, *The Civilisation of France: An Introduction*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p. 100.

Good, i.e. how evident is it that the metaphysical ideal of the good is transported into the physical activity of the human being in the world.[187]

Earlier, part II of *Science et Perception* addressed Weil's Cartesian exercise that set about to determine indubitable knowledge by doubting all things potentially subject to illusion. Taking a rather different route to Descartes, Weil set about to show that her existence is determined by the operation of activity rather than the operation of thought itself. Hence, 'The power that I exercise over my own belief is not an illusion; it is through this power that I know that I think'. She concludes: 'I have power, therefore I am'. In his introduction to Price's translation of Weil's *Lectures on Philosophy*, Winch illustrates this difference between Weil and Descartes: 'her main divergence from Descartes consists in an insistence that the word 'I' does not stand for a substantial subject of consciousness, but is simply the expression of such methodical activity'.[188] Winch's comments seem to suggest that Weil's 'I' is unsubstantiated. Her self-determination rests on the basis of the activity of her power to think in the first place – a power that she can command.

But Winch suggests that this does not necessarily determine the whole of who she is apart from having the ability to assert a power to address whatever presents itself to her mind. In addition to the mind there are other factors that take into account further fundamental attributes of the human being than just the expression of 'I' expressing pure activity. This includes, for example, the role of the human body in activity. Weil, according to Winch faces 'the difficulty of giving any clear account of the relation between the 'I' as expressing pure activity and the role of the human body in activity'.[189] For she goes on to say that where she is not subject to the power she has over her thoughts, the movements of her body depend upon the confrontation of contingent factors, that is, factors in the external world that are unforeseen. 'The movements of my body, therefore, cannot be exclusively an expression of my activity'.[190] But the problem she faces then is how to address the conception of bodily activity if all that is addressed in relation to the 'I' is the activity of thought. Weil's problem alludes to the earlier

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[187] Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"*, pp. 13-15.
[188] LP, pp. 4-5.
[189] Ibid., p. 6.
[190] Ibid., p. 7. See also, Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: "The Just Balance"*, pp. 12-13.

argument concerning *The Beautiful and the Good*, that is to say, she is so entirely mesmerized by the vision of her 'ideal man' that she fails to consider whether this ideal is subject to the sort of alteration that may take place with the transformation of thought into action. Can one suppose that as much as Weil wanted to move away from abstract, elitist thought, she may be attempting to sustain the importance of abstract thinking but exposing it to a wider audience of listeners? In that case, is Weil naturally an idealist?

Tracing through the evolution of modern French thought during the last half of the 20th century, Vincent Descombes explores the division between the beginnings of a movement in French Philosophy in the 1930s – Existentialism – and the revolt of existential thought against earlier academic idealism. Under the title, 'The Search for a Concrete Philosophy', Descombes outlines the thought framework of an idealist. A person, he says, is an idealist 'when he assumes as his guide in life an "idea" or an "ideal". By "idea" we mean a "mental vision", one which does not originate in site [...]'.[191] It is well known that the lessons of experience are bitter, and lead more radically to "realism" than to idealism'. Descombes description of an idealist's mental vision corresponds to the structure of Weil's ideology, i.e. her mental vision of a transcendental reality that everyone is capable of recognizing and embracing no matter how mediocre their cognitive faculties appear to be. But the transition from thinking to the reality of experience in both their cases is different. Weil's re-interpretation of Descartes' Cartesian enterprise that suggests he is not only an idealist but also a realist is addressed from the perspective of his thoughts on the external world.

Descartes' realism that, according to Weil, provokes a contradiction within his doctrines does not go far enough to show how the intellectual realization and tension of this contradiction will appear to unfold in the context of experience. Descombes is concerned to address the differences between thought and experience that aims to authenticate the value of both aspects, but more importantly, reflectively pursue the search for a concrete philosophy in human life.[192] In short, this pursuit suggests that the 'mental vision' cannot be reduced to 'any "lesson of experience". It is well known that the lessons of experience are bitter, and lead more readily to "realism" than to

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[191] Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding, pp. 16-17.
[192] Ibid., p. 17.

"idealism"'. His suggestion here is that these lessons do not necessarily presuppose the implementation of a preconceived ideal reality. The 'error of the idealist [then] is that he takes no account of what life might teach him, and behaves as if things occurred in reality just as they ought to occur according to the *idea* that he entertains of an ideal world'.[193] Conceptualizing her ideal world in order to bring relief particularly to the lives of those that suffer is the benchmark of Weil's own philosophical and mental framework. Contrary to Weil, Descombes continues that 'no *idea* can direct the philosopher in his actions except the idea that he must act. Action becomes completely indeterminate'.[194]

The difficulty, therefore, that Winch identifies with Weil's inability to bring into relation the possibility of having thoughts about something and the possibility of acting in such a way that the action corresponds to those thoughts suggest that the relation between thought and action is disordered and unconnected. There appears to be the sort of concern with Weil that can be summarized by Ludwig Wittgenstein's attention to the use of language: 'Actually I should like to say that [...] the words you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life. [...] *Practice* gives the words their sense'.[195]

The bigger consequence here is the appearance of an unbridgeable gulf between Weil's metaphysical conception of activity governed by thought that she invariably controls, and the experience of bodily movements that are not under her control but subject to forces within the external world. Whilst she then does appear to recognize the limitations of this power of thought, she overcomes this problem by addressing the dual-role of the imagination and the importance of perception and work in order to link the mind to the world. What remains unqualified, however, is how the significance of work and perception transform thought into action for the activity of the mind and its corresponding link to the world does not specifically address how such thoughts will be known and recognized by others. As Descombes points out in reference to Descartes, the biggest problem with the idealism of the cogito is if ""being = "being-known" then it

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[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., p. 18.
[195] See, for example, Nigel Pleasants, *Wittgenstein and the idea of a Critical Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 60-5.

must be ascertained by whom this being is known'.[196] By whom is this power that Weil identifies being known? The ideal of power which becomes the determining factor of her existence comes up against the problem of solipsism, which says, that one's self, in this case Weil's power, can only be known with certainty by her. Solipsism raises the problem here of how this power can be sufficiently determined if there remains undetermined the plurality of powers. In that sense, Weil faces 'the problem of the other' and therefore, the idea that her own sense of power runs into conflict with the 'other' representing the negation of her own certainty.[197]

In short, this issue appears to emerge from the separation between thought and action in her dissertation. Given that she seems unwilling to engage in real action, and that action, according to Descombe, appears to be unpredictable, Weil is faced with the problem of how to work through the consequences of her thoughts on the basis that there is no fundamental determinacy in action. There is this innate structure in her thinking that suggests her thoughts turned towards the world of value remain so indefinitely, and that her failure to re-orientate them towards the material realm suggests that her 'illuminated' thoughts are not fully realized. This problem, however, is explored further in Chapter III, but the conclusion here is that in spite of Weil's earlier intentions to bring into relation thought and action, theory and practice, there appears to be, at this stage, an inherent divorce between the two aspects. The *Beautiful and the Good* explains this separation in view of her relentless intention to realize the thinking person within the reality of the worker. Yet, what she appears to be unable to do, which *Science et perception* clearly demonstrates, is the way in which the worker's newly found ability to think can be turned in on itself so that its capacity to act will aim to transform its own life. This transformation attempts to ensure that such an individual is no longer bound to the chains of depravity, but released into the boundless freedom of a world she desperately wanted the oppressed to embrace.

But since these impoverished souls remained oppressed in spite of Weil's most concerted intellectual efforts, there is perhaps another perspective to the structure of her thoughts that help to emphasise the problem. According to Weil in one of her social and

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[196] Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, pp. 19-20.
[197] Ibid.

political essays, *Oppression and Liberty*, what limits a person's ability to give expression to their intelligence and freedom is oppression.[198] Where this is explored further in the next chapter, her revolt against social injustice and oppression is based on her argument that a person's lack of freedom and self-expression prohibits the continued operation of social collectivities. But there seems to be a lack of recognition that her own ability to think individually and independently is made possible by the very social conditions in which she lived but deplored. As Winch argues: whilst the 'exercise of intelligent thought by individuals [...] is seen as one of the most important limits to the oppressive power of [social collectivities], it does often lead to the comparative neglect of the social conditions which make the thought of individuals possible. The dependence on other people which is a necessary feature of life in a society is treated as a limitation on the individual's freedom'.[199]

On the other hand, revolting against the social order was something familiar to Simone Weil. Alain's negative view of the state, particularly the corrupting influence of power, would certainly have deepened her feelings of revolt and her outright rejection of false social and political solutions. Alain, however, did not preach violent revolt, but rather, obedience because he believed that revolt always reinforced the powers of a society and made the citizen more of a slave. Weil's inclination, though, towards intellectual and experiential works that promoted political and social revolt suggest that she had felt a lack in Alain's doctrine. During the middle of September 1941, Pétrement went to spend three days with Weil at Poët, and during one of several conversations together, Weil commented that one of Alain's unfortunate shortcomings was 'to have rejected pain'. But this brings to mind another dimension to Weil's thinking – her religious and metaphysical thought – that aims to address the significance and meaning of suffering.[200] With this theme investigated at a later stage, her capacity nevertheless, to think in this alternative way counter argues the idea in the previous paragraph that the exploitations of an unjust society is somehow appropriate for the promotion of individualism. Rather, her attention towards social exploitation had a much deeper agenda than merely the capacity for the individual to think correctly. To introduce this

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[198] OL, pp. 1ff.
[199] LP, pp. 18-19.
[200] P, p. 473.

deeper agenda will provide an opportunity to simultaneously draw a conclusion to chapter II and begin to prepare the way for another level of investigation in chapter III that has to do with Weil's social, political and religious preoccupations.

2.8 *Conclusion*

Chapter II has aimed to address the nature and structure of Weil's thoughts by discussing her approach to doing philosophy. This has followed by a rather generalized account of the nature of French philosophy during the 19th / early 20th century and its contribution to her formidable philosophical attitude to the individual and the world. In short, Weil is concerned to emphasize the importance of addressing abstract philosophical thought in the domain of practical life. Her reasons concern the way in which social and political exploitations persistently resolve to separate the thinker from the worker. She intends to fuse them together not only in the sense in which the worker, having the potential to think correctly, will be able to lead a better life, but he or she will, more importantly, gain access to the enduring mystery of her transcendental reality.

This philosophical and spiritual framework is subsequently trailed back through time in order to identify the connections between Weil and her philosophical predecessors, and in particular, to identify the commensurability between Weil and Alain within the dimension of French spiritualist thought. Spiritualism asserts the metaphysical and ethical primacy of the individual mind where correct thought incarnates into action in the world. Its use of the higher mental faculties are neither reducible to material processes (sense experience) nor assimilated to a higher level of reality (the absolute). Several key issues questioned the integrity of her spiritualist path. For example, there was the suggestion that she might be more appropriately an idealist on the basis that Alexander's action of self-sacrifice in her essay, *The Beautiful and the Good*, demonstrates a commitment to an ideal on a higher level of reality. Her analysis, in retrospect, failed to establish a clear connection between thought and action that is further emphasized through her dissertation on Descartes. Whilst these early concerns intimate the appearance of a gap at this stage between the material and immaterial world in her thinking, which is exacerbated by her revulsion against social and political injustice, there

is a more fundamental point to her doing philosophy that is clearly illustrated in *Science et perception*.

Weil concludes at the end of *Science et perception* that the nature of science is tied to the nature of ordinary thought by means of perception and work. Scientific thought then is simply a matter of correct perception, which work sets about to achieve through ordinary thought.[201] Work aims to connect a human being to the world of value thereby establishing a person of real substance. This is the return of earlier explorations that highlighted Weil's fundamental task with philosophy, that is, to initiate inner transformation in the life of the individual. Philosophical reflection is not just about separating out theories and speculation from the narratives of life, but rather, bringing together the unity of ideas and the art of living that has potentially the opportunity to affect a person's mode of being-in-the-world. In her *Formative Writings*, a few sections on from the translation of her essay, *Science et perception*, appears a short section entitled, *Philosophy*, that appeals to this truth.[202]

Written while Weil and her parents were living in Marseilles as refugees from Frances' 1940 defeat to and occupation by the Nazis, it represents her orientation towards the fusion between theory and practice and the expansion of her practical thinking beyond the hemispheres of western thought, and into non-Christian, non-white cultures and religions.[203] It praises her concern for all human beings and her motivation to find an understanding of how common experiences which appear on the surface to be far removed from the world of meaning are in fact impregnated with meaning. As Weil says in her writings on the order of the world, 'by loving the order of the world we imitate the divine love which created this universe [and] of which we are a part'.[204] On the same subject, she even goes further to say that the face that turns 'toward matter is love of the order of the world'.[205] What we have within the structure of her philosophical thinking then is a practical philosophy that is not only universal in the sense of who it applies to, but representative of a way of living. Her conclusions about how the importance of work enable a human being to connect with the material world goes a step further in

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[201] FW, pp. 86-88. See also David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, pp. 26ff.
[202] Ibid., pp. 279-89.
[203] Ibid., p. 280.
[204] Ibid., p. 281.
[205] Ibid.

connecting to what she identifies as the world of value. This world is associated with her mystical insights which, in discussion on the relationship between the human and the divine, will be explored in the next chapter.

What emerges from this agenda, however, is that her conception of God corresponds to Descartes', that is, a God who is omnipotent and transcendent.[206] This, nevertheless, does not lead to the idea that a transcendent God implies there cannot be any sort of relationship or connection between the material and immaterial worlds. Let me explain. I begin the next chapter with a brief exploration of Weil's early intellectual understanding of the divine reality through her dissertation on Descartes, but the way Weil reads Descartes is in a similar fashion to another formidable figure that overshadowed her later intellectual and personal life. Her love of Greek thought, and in particular, her deep appreciation and use of Plato is unparalleled. As earlier discussions emphasized Weil's intention to fuse together abstract and ordinary thought, she relies on Descartes and Plato to create this possibility though from entirely different perspectives.

Firstly, her earlier revisions of Descartes aimed to show how the abstract, intellectual world is very much related to the practical, ordinary world of misunderstood and misguided mediocrity. Where she goes from here with Plato is to drive her intellectual methodology through the writings of Plato's metaphysical understanding of the visible and invisible realms, arguing in the latter case that both realms in the form of the human and the divine are very much connected with one another. But there is a rather ironic twist to this story that the next chapter attempts to address. Where Descartes conceived of a transcendent, divine reality, which Weil's alliance with his understanding of God places her in the unfortunate situation of being a metaphysical dualist, her use of Plato's idea of divine transcendence suggests that a mature turning point emerges with the way she conceptualizes the nature of the divine in her later writings. According to Weil, and her reading of Plato, God and humanity can be united. For as she says, 'the whole of Greek civilization is a search for bridges to relate human misery with the divine perfection',[207] and she aims to work this mediation in order to draw the suffering and

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[206] René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 234-42.
[207] IC, pp. 74ff.

afflicted into her transcendental reality.[208] In short, her use of Platonic thought in her writings is to ensure that a link is established between the supernatural and the natural world, which is a significant development from her dissertation on Descartes.

Having arrived, therefore, where her idea of the void begins to emerge through the sources of Weil's intellectual development, one can clearly recognize that its surfacing is only possible, for her at least, with the importance of thought and thinking correctly. But this chapter gives a clear sense that whilst she brings about a connection between thought and action, there is the concern upon closer examination of her writings that thought and action are not necessarily tied together. Weil is very much preoccupied to hold to the supremacy of her thoughts and engineer this way of thinking in relation to the worker. What is not necessarily clear at this stage is where does the worker go from here? How is this detached form of thinking meant to appear in the form of action in the world? In order to address these concerns, a detailed exploration of the structure of her thinking has to step into the domain of her mystical and religious preoccupations. Assessing this domain through several metaphysical ideas and her use of Plato in the next chapter will aim to address whether Weil managed to bring into focus the tension between the human and the divine – her understanding of the human condition – and whether the unrelated areas of thought and action from earlier appear to facilitate this relationship between worlds. In the meantime, I abstain from making any further judgments, and rather continue to explore her unyielding struggle to deliver the world back to the divine.

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[208] See Eric O. Sprinsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*, pp. 137ff.

Chapter III: Thinking the 'Void'

> The problem is, in short, [...] to succeed in grasping the mechanism of oppression, in understanding by what means it arises, subsists, transforms itself, by what means, perhaps, it might [...] disappear. This is, to all intents and purposes, a novel question.[1]

3.1 *Introduction*

The aim of the previous chapter was to discuss the nature and structure of Weil's thoughts, and to illustrate precisely that thinking had to be supreme in order for the individual to know itself and the external world. This chapter, however, aims to examine and investigate why correct and intelligent thinking was so important for Simone Weil. There is some development towards the end of the last chapter that connects the motivation behind her philosophical inquiries to the emergence of her mystical theology in later life. In that case, questions concerned with what that purpose was with her approach to the importance of thinking and philosophical inquiry, why she was so obsessive with the immaterial reality, and why she embodied such a relentless desire to use this reality to alleviate human suffering and affliction, aim to bring forward a more enriching discussion of the religious, social and political aspirations of Weil's writings. But to bring these questions into a coherent discussion, it is important to initially uncover the central claims and issues addressed so far in relation to her life and writings.

Earlier accounts illustrated how Weil's perception of thought emerged from her adolescent crisis, namely, that anyone no matter how mediocre their cognitive faculties could have access to what she described as the 'realms of truth'. Her attitude, therefore, towards a universal superiority of thought evolved into her intellectual alliance with Alain and the spiritualist movement that both believed that the value of human life is determined from the activity of the higher mental faculties of the individual. But the discussion addressed several implications to this assertion of supreme thought not only in

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[1] MILES, p. 128.

relation to her overall philosophical motifs, but also through her alliance to ordinary members of society.

In summation, Weil argues that modern science is universally accessible to all and that its attempt to establish and maintain, apart from ordinary thought, an elite, superior understanding of the external world is fallacious. What establishes this crucial link between both forms of thought is the significance of perception and work, that is, thoughts that are controlled and detached from worldly illusions in order for the mind to make correct contact with the exterior world. At this stage, she affirms her adolescent conviction through her revised interpretations of Descartes that no one, regardless of the state of their mental faculties is precluded from the 'realm of truth reserved for genius'. Whilst these conclusions will no doubt parallel with the sentiments of her mentor, Alain,[2] they were at considerable risk of running against key French intellectual mainstreams during her lifetime.[3] The irony of her risk, in particular, her dissertation on Descartes, is that it in turn brings to light the risk in this investigation the suggestion that the structure of Weil's thoughts, based on the incarnation of thought into action, is subject to scrutiny and evaluation.

So far, the investigation has attempted to demonstrate that there is no clear sense where Weil appropriately addresses this transformation of thought into proper, transformative action in her writings. In spite of her concern that oppression and oppressive social collectivities interfere with the freedom of individuals, the previous chapter argued that she neglects the way in which these social conditions make the thoughts of individuals possible.[4] In other words, the interdependence of people is a necessary feature of life in a society that is altogether rejected by her as a limitation to the fruition of intelligent thought.[5] The implications of this problem continue as this chapter

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[2] See FW, p. 6.

[3] One such example of this occurs through Léon Brunschvicg's disagreement of Weil's interpretation of Descartes' thought, i.e. that Descartes is not only an idealist but equally a realist. See P, p. 66.

[4] This is particularly evident in the light of liberation theologies that aim to intellectually and practically address political and social systems of exploitation. See, for example, James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed, The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Press, 1992); Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (New York: Orbis Press, 1987), pp. 6-8, 22-42; *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), pp.34-44.

[5] As the political and spiritual teacher, Mohandas Ghandi, once remarked, 'interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of man as self-sufficiency. Man is a social being'. See Mahatma Gandhi, Louis

explores Weil's social and political ambitions. Her attempt, nevertheless, to bring about an appropriate set of social and political conditions in society that enable the ordinary individual to make this break into understanding the divine reality is key to comprehending Weil's social, political and religious aspirations. What appears though to be a clear separation between the perfection of the supernatural and the imperfections of the natural world continue, at this stage, to support the idea that Weil is an innate metaphysical dualist.

What one has to consider, however, is whether her drive to take intelligent thought into the heart of her understanding of divine reality, and what then evolves into her mystical consciousness, aims to fuse these two worlds together so that thought incarnates into action. The importance of key conceptual notions such as contradiction, the void, the human condition and the reality of work all play a vital role in this discussion of whether it is plausible to suggest that, contrary to Weil as the perceived realist and pragmatist, there is also Weil the idealist and dualist. This chapter, therefore, aims to consider her metaphysical understanding of the human and divine reality, and whether through the expression of her social, political and religious ideas and experiences she attempts to implement praxis in order that the value of the good is preserved against the atrocities and horrors of pre-war and wartime Europe.[6]

To pursue this line of inquiry, and in light of developing further from Chapter I her notion of contradiction, one has to now consider whether Weil engages coherently in the dialectic exchange of her ideas and aspirations. The jump from her philosophical preoccupations to her mystical life has to be addressed in order to see how she attempts to address the relationship between the human situation and divine reality. This requires a discussion of the significance of work, particularly in relation to her social and political preoccupations, in addition to her evolving conception of God in the aftermath of her dissertation. Forthcoming discussions aim to support future metaphysical explorations into the tensions and conflicts between these worlds through her religious writings. In the meantime, the discussion now continues where the previous chapter left off: why is it that the nature of work is so important to Weil and how did her social and political

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Fischer, M.K.Gandhi, and Gandhi, *The Essential Ghandi: An Anthology of his Writings on His Life, Works and Ideas* (London: Vintage books, 2002), pp. 198-206.

[6] See T. Zeldin, *France 1848-1945: Intellect and Pride*, pp. 230-55.

preoccupations aim to elucidate this importance? The discussion turns to a continuation of the theme of work and industry in order to establish a link between Weil's supremacy of thought and the more important implementation of connecting the world of value to the human situation, particularly as she sees it in the suffering of workers.

3.2 *The Meaning of Work*

Earlier, Weil attempted to demonstrate through *Science et perception* how work and perception are essential for the mind to connect with and understand the external world. The importance of thinking as an individual and intelligently is an important outcome from this investigation. The reason is that it addresses Weil's wider philosophical theme to reject the tyranny of bourgeois elitists and any form of authoritarianism that enslaves the human being and strips them of their integrity as an individual thinker.[7] The livelihood of a person utilizing its mind and thoughts in this way would lay the foundation for an egalitarian system, a system where work would be of supreme value, and its capacity to exercise thought and reason in the human being would cultivate worldly detachment by overriding immediate gratifications and senseless passions.[8] Her objective, in a nutshell, was to establish a moral framework whereby the individual would be able to embrace a value-orientated existence in order to bridge the thinker with the worker.[9] This objective is forcefully established in one of her major political and social texts, *Oppression and Liberty.*

So far, one is under no illusion that Weil's diagnosis of, and remedies for, the terminal illnesses of modern civilization are nothing short of explicit. Firstly, she demands for a restoration of spiritual values within society, secondly, a re-evaluation of the nature of work, followed lastly, by a return of activity and mental intelligence from the collective to the individual.[10] On the macro-level, Weil's explication of the

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[7] OL, p. 40.

[8] For a good discussion by Weil on this political theme, see LP, pp. 135-9. See also Simone Weil, 'Theoretical Picture of a Free Society' in OL, pp. 79-101.

[9] P, p. 88. An example of fusing together the worker and thinker, Weil reinstituted classes for workers at the St. – Étienne Labour Exchange in an attempt to improve the worker's command of the written French language and educate them on matters to do with the economy. See ibid., pp. 87-89.

[10] One way in which Weil sets to achieve this return is through the minimization of powers to large companies, legislative assemblies and political parties. For a good discussion of her approach to her view

importance of work from *Science et perception* continues to evolve into her concern to clarify and spiritually illuminate social and political issues of modern Europe.[11] On the micro-level, the significance of work leads her to expand her concerns from an intellectual viewpoint to personal experiences of work in large industry. As she evaluated her teenage crisis through her dissertation on Descartes and set about identifying a philosophical framework in which to challenge social and intellectual divisions, Weil intends to assess even further the status of her epistemology through the internal avenues of the human soul. In order to establish a relation between the inner workings of the human being and their outer reality of industry and labour, she set herself the task of working out a theoretical social system that would meet the concerns of the individual, followed by an encounter in the most direct and possible way what it must be like to be a manual worker.[12] From the onset, this was not merely an 'experience', but an opportunity to learn from the struggle of the working classes.[13] Broadly speaking, the discussion that is set to take place is to address Weil's challenge to overcome the human situation in the polis with the thrust of her social, political and religious ideals. McLellan elucidates this challenge between her mystical aspirations and worldly politics. He argues that while 'most of those who develop mystical tendencies reject the secular world, Weil continued to hold fast, in a sometimes desperate tension, both to her mystical beliefs and to her political commitments'.[14]

What was identified earlier as her desperate struggle to maintain an appropriate balance between thought and action from *Science et perception* continues to be explored further in terms of the relationship between the essence of the human being and the demands set against it in society. The essence of the individual, in particular, is the basis in which Weil's social, political and religious thoughts make any sense at all. T. S. Elliot

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On the importance of placing limitations on collective powers, see David McLellan, 'Religion and Politics in the thought of Simone Weil', *Pamphlet Library* 24 (1991), 1-19 (pp. 6-8). See also, TNFR, pp. 13-18, 33-5.

[11] Ibid., pp. 204-5.

[12] The Weil scholar, Richard Rees, translated several of Weil's letter writings from 1931 to 1943. Translations of letters written between 1934 and 1936 on the subject of hard labour and industrial organisation, which combined, address the nature of work and the conditions of work in industry, focus on the task she set herself to experience and evaluate a life of hard manual labour. See SL, pp. 7-63.

[13] See Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, pp. 82ff. See also, Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutierrez*, p. 28.

[14] David McLellan, 'Religion and Politics in the thought of Simone Weil', p. 1.

points out in his 'preface' to Weil's, *The Need for Roots*, that she had 'a profound horror of what she called the *collectivity* – the monster created by modern totalitarianism. What she cared about was human souls'.[15] To bring forward then the possibility for the human soul to experience Weil's 'mysticism of work'[16] the discussion, in the broadest sense, needs to emphasize what she means by 'mysticism' followed by an assessment of the implications of her religious experiences which took place after the enormous suffering she experienced during her year of factory work.[17]

Given that she clearly demonstrates an innate disposition towards the pragmatic operations of human affairs, the question as to whether, ultimately speaking, the human and the divine are interrelated through Weil's intellectual preoccupations, and whether her metaphysical ideas are appropriate as a working, living reality is also the basis of further exploration. Since she cared so dearly about human souls, what better place to find this relationship than in the place whereby the intensity of the soul is most exposed in the world – in the social and political community.[18] For her, this place enabled her to develop an intellectual treatise on the polis and address experiences of human suffering and conflict; a place that became the most profound turning point in her life and in her journey as a mystic.

3.3 *Factory Work and Human Oppression*

Weil's undertaking of a year of factory work was, perhaps, the beginning stages of her journey to attempt to turn her intellectual vocation into a living vocation.[19] Whilst her vocation with human experience is rooted in her adolescent crisis, which incidentally, represented the source of her intellectual developments in *Science et perception*, her social and political thoughts, however, preceded her factory and, shortly afterwards, mystical experiences. In light of these experiences though, and through an exploration into her religious writings, the orientation of her thinking will be shown to have changed

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[15] See TNFR, p. xi.
[16] GG, pp. 157-160.
[17] See, for example, her letters in SL.
[18] This was Weil's primary intention in relation to her writings on Oppression and Liberty, and her dissertation on Descartes. For further details, see OL, pp. 36-117; FW, pp. 35-114.
[19] See Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait*, pp. 32-47.

dramatically, particularly with her growing desire to juxtapose the worker's experience with her vision of a transcendental reality.[20]

Nevertheless, Weil's mystical vocation was preceded and influenced by several life-changing experiences and further intellectual investigations during her early career as a lycée philosophy teacher.[21] One key example occurred between December 1934 and August 1935 where Weil was employed as an unskilled worker in several French factories outside of the immediate facinity of Paris. Her *Journal d'usine*, a diary she kept while working in the factories, illustrated her working movements throughout the year.[22] In the first four months, she worked on the front line of an electrical plant called the Alsthom electrical works, under the supervision of the Alsthom manager, Auguste Detoeuf. From there she moved to the Forges de Basse-Indre, and afterwards, in a weary and exhausted state, she ended her labour experiences at the Renault works.[23] A year after her labour experiences, she wrote several letters to Detoeuf expressing, through her own experiences, the severe disintegration of factory workers, and the general ethos of oppression and exploitation of modern industrialization upon the human soul.[24] Although her work experience was not the source of her intellectual inquiries into the condition of the modern state, it did conform to earlier writings, particularly during the summer of 1934, where she heavily criticized the state of the modern world and developed a comprehensive understanding of oppression.[25] Yet, one ought to recognize that her social and political priorities during that time were a continuation of her epistemic re-evalution of Cartesian thought in *Science et perception*, which in turn, aimed to address the dignity of human thought, the importance of exercising the mind in order to know the world, and to express a life of value within the polis.[26] These intellectual inquiries form a basis in which she pursues her theoretical analysis of the social system in her earliest major political text, *Oppression and Liberty*. Within this work, her essay entitled, 'Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression' ferociously attacks the

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[20] See, for example, 'Between the Human and the Divine', in BHD, pp. 105-145.
[21] For a good discussion of Weil's teaching period between 1931-1934, see David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, pp. 38-62; Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil*, pp. 51-81.
[22] SL, pp. 4-5.
[23] Ibid., p. 1.
[24] Ibid., pp. 56ff.
[25] See, for example, OL, pp.36ff; BHD, pp. 37ff.
[26] For a good discussion of this progression in Weil's thinking, see LP, pp. 2-23.

injustices that prevail within the polis. Continuing on from her dissertation, Weil ferments over the divisions within society through her explicit dissatisfaction with the nature of modern industrial civilization, and the fundamental lack of consideration given to the welfare of human life. Divided into four distinct parts, this essay represents the main body of *Oppression and Liberty*.[27]

The focus of her discussion concerns the manner in which industrial conditions depreciate and undermine the activity, freedom and self-expression of human beings. Rather than safeguarding their active nature against the obstacles of natural forces which play heavily upon the lives of individuals as well as their immediate environment,[28] they are, instead, subject to enslavement. Bound by the conditions of their infringed existence implies, according to Weil, that work fails to exercise thought so that, instead, it unfolds as an entirely mechanical exercise for the purpose of production and profit.[29] Through this essay on the causes of liberty and social oppression, Weil confronts the issues of enslavement explicitly with a large degree of her thought owed to the paradox of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's opening sentence of *The Social Contract*: 'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains'.[30] This is how Weil describes the human condition:[31] 'nothing on earth can stop man from feeling himself born for liberty. Whatever may happen, he can never accept servitude; for he is a thinking creature'.[32] The question is: how does Weil attempt to work through this human situation from a political and social point of view?

Weil's concern to liberate the oppressed and her desire to address its social and political implications lies at the heart of *Oppression and Liberty*. In her mind, if one is to

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[27] These four distinct parts are as follows: a critique of Marxism, an analysis of oppression, a theoretical picture of a free society, followed by an antithetical sketch of the actual reality of contemporary social life. See OL, pp. 36-114.

[28] These natural forces have to do with Weil's discovery of 'necessity', i.e. a network of necessary relationships that govern the behaviour of matter. Necessity, according to Weil, is nothing other than the basis of thought itself. In other words, these relationships within nature that create obstacles for the active nature of the human being are crucial for the actual revelation of the mind itself. Weil's notion of Necessity will be subject to further exploration in due course. For details, see OL, pp. 108-9; Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*, pp. 60-76.

[29] This is discussed particularly in the second part of 'Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression': "Analysis of Oppression" which is an attempt by Weil to grasp the mechanism of oppression, that is to say, to understand 'by what means it arises, subsists, transforms itself, by what means, perhaps, it might disappear'. See OL, p. 54.

[30] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1998), p. 5.

[31] OL, p. 70.

[32] Ibid., p. 50.

explore the possibility of a free society one has to understand the causes and implications of its current social climate. For Weil, this takes place by way of understanding their thought patterns and systematically analyzing its social and political outcomes.[33] For example, one of the major causes of oppression is power. Power constitutes an irredeemable disequilibrium between those that rule and those that are ruled. This occurs not only in public life but equally in private life: 'love, for example, destroys all balance in the soul as soon as it seeks to dominate or be dominated by its object'.[34] But rather than merely citing power as an intellectual cause of oppression, Weil wants to show that the race for power is the heart of the problem for there is no limit or proportion set to it; the race for power 'enslaves everybody, strong and weak alike'.[35] With this race set to enable one master to compete against another, in industry, this drama prevails in the high level of surplus production. High production and profit becomes 'the chief weapon in the race for power'.[36] What Weil suggests here is that power by its very nature enslaves both the oppressor and oppressed alike because they have both become controlled 'by instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured'.[37] Consequently, both parties are subjected 'to the implacable demands of the struggle for power'.[38] I will return to this issue of power when considering the implications of Weil's concept of a free society.

In the meantime, the division of labour at the macro-level is a primary cause of oppression. What causes this division resides in the nature of power. But Weil wants to deepen her inquiry into oppression at the micro-level by identifying several key characteristics of oppressive regimes that give some insight into the structure of their thoughts and how their thinking proceeds to establish the reality of oppression in the first place. But the basis in which these closer examinations take place draw from earlier epistemic preoccupations on the relationship between thought, the exterior world and the significance of work. Here, in *Oppression and Liberty* the universality and importance of individual and intelligent thought and the incarnation of thought into action is revived.

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[33] Ibid., p. 60.
[34] Ibid., p. 64.
[35] Ibid., p. 65.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., p. 66.
[38] Ibid., p. 76.

Intent upon addressing the degree of 'organic deterioration' in society,[39] Weil returns here with a familiar tone from the previous chapter where she attempted to evaluate the intellectual divisions between the working class and the scientific, intellectual bourgeois community. Here, however, her social and political concerns are aimed at the degrading division of labour into intellectual and manual labour.[40] She becomes a near political orator, hoping to restore human freedom, on the one hand, but attributing a level of accountability to oppressive regimes on the other:

> We want to make it abundantly clear the true relationships between man and nature – those relationships that are concealed, in every society based on exploitation, by "the degrading division of labour into intellectual and manual labour". We want to give back to man, that is to say, to 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 the material conditions of work; [...]. This is the proper task of our generation.[41]

What ultimately is the focus of Weil's social preoccupations are the individual, the worker, and his or her true relationship with nature. In the first major section of *Oppression and Liberty*, 'Reflections Concerning Technocracy, National-Socialism, the U.S.S.R. and Certain Other Matters', Weil begins with the view that oppressive societies give birth to a false conception of the relationship between the individual and nature.[42] Precisely, this false conception rests upon the distinction she identified in her dissertation as the difference between a 'theoretical culture and the downtrodden', the separation of thought and work. Consequently, says Weil, the 'false conception so formed tends to prolong the duration of oppression, insofar as it causes this separation between thought and work to seem legitimate'.[43] In other words, theoretical cultures that promote these divisions do so on the basis of their own self-regulated and self-governed systems of thought that reflect nothing but their maintenance of the status quo and bourgeois relations. In philosophical terms, this way of thinking is a representation of idealism.[44] But these division are not exclusive to the idealist for in opposition to this community

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[39] SL, p. 4.
[40] OL, p. 18.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., p. 24.
[43] Ibid., p. 25.
[44] Ibid., p. 26.

and in the ranks anti-bourgeois social relations, Weil reflects upon the materialist position through Lenin where, according to Weil, he shows that that they all come back in the end, once stripped of their pretentious phraseology, to idealism, that is to say, to a negation of the outside world'.[45] According to Weil, Lenin's materialism suffers from the same problem as the idealist who maintains a superiority of thought over and independently of the material world. In short, she says, each fails to adequately reflect upon their respective 'other'.[46] Their own lack of self-reflection and their inability to think out of the 'box' and observe their own thoughts suggests, for Weil at least, that their unfortunate methodologies are not conducive to the nature of human freedom.

Therefore, it is easy to visualize how such a person, organization or nation will behave once it acquires a sense of power; it will rob a person of liberty and thought. Through their respective failures to reflect upon their own situation, each 'strips knowledge of all meaning'.[47] What brings about this loss of meaning is the degree of abstract contemplation in their methodologies, which are inept from placing the human being at the centre of their philosophical world views. The implication of her argument is that no matter who dominates and who submits, or whether these positions happen to reverse, philosophically speaking, to 'abuse the other' leads persons, communities, organizations or societies into a situation of disequilibrium and into a divided 'master-slave' situation.[48] In this relation, oppression resides through the separation between the understanding of an idea and the application of that idea.[49] The question that has to be put to Weil is this: can such a relationship ever be avoided or resolved, and can any of the social and political structures in society ever attain to a perfect equilibrium between its members?

3.4 *Human Freedom and Social Equilibrium*

Social systems, therefore, that abuse their respective 'other' fail to locate the individual, rather than the product, at the centre of labour production. Furthermore, they appear

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[45] Ibid., p. 28.
[46] Ibid., p. 30.
[47] Ibid., p. 31.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 93.

unable, intellectually speaking, to keep the human being at the centre of their philosophical systems. What this means is that the innate freedom born to all human beings is compromised. Through Weil's Cartesian dissertation, chapter II highlighted earlier how contact between the mind and nature was possible through the exchange between thought and action. This exchange emerged through contradiction and tension. Here in her theoretical analysis of the social system, the relation between thought and action resurfaces as the basis of a free society. The absolutely free person, says Weil, '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'.[50] The situation in which the human being finds itself then is neither in the mind alone nor in nature alone, but in the connection between them which is made possible by the nature of thought itself. Reality, therefore, appears as a result of contact between the mind and world, 'in the act by which thinking man takes possession of the world'.[51] Her emphasis on an epistemic balance between thought and action[52] aims to express human value and dignity as central to the establishment of social liberation. The question is, do the recurring problems of this relation resurface, or does Weil manage to establish a justified argument for a free society?

In retrospect, I am not attempting to abandon the established belief that Weil's life was not just a series of abstract intellectual propositions, but ideas that attempted to fuse with the very fragments of human life. There is ample evidence to conclude that she was always attempting to face the difficulties of her metaphysical writings in the material world.[53] The question is whether her metaphysical ideas are appropriately conducive to the affairs of human living, and, in effect, whether the relation between the human and divine is fully established in a substantial, meaningful, and transformative manner. One has to address, if, intellectually speaking, the relation between thought and action from

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[50] Ibid., p. 85.

[51] What Weil is suggesting is that when there is a lack of balance between the thinking subject and the object of thought that was associated earlier with a division of labour, surplus production and specialization of industry, the individual is reduced to a mere cog in a vast machine. The whole of our civilisation, says Weil, founded on specialisation, 'implies the enslavement of those who execute and to those who co-ordinate; and on such a basis one can only organise and perfect oppression, not lighten it'. See ibid., p. 42.

[52] Ibid., p. 90.

[53] See, for example, David McLellan, 'Religion and Politics in the Thought of Simone Weil', *Centre for the Study of Religion and Society* pp. 1-4.

chapter II runs into the sort of problems to be addressed in her analysis of the social and political system, i.e. whether the relation between both aspects is sustained exclusively within the mind itself so that there is no clear sense in which a person actually bridges their internal reality with the external world. Consequently, one also has to ask if the relation Weil identifies between thought and action appropriately defines true liberty. In order to explore these concerns one has to take a closer look at her conception of a free society.

The discussion so far has identified the free individual as someone who is able to order their own actions towards a particular end. This activity of ordering under the supremacy of thought is governed by Weil's conviction that thought not only represents a person's highest dignity,[54] but that the opportunity for thought to be exercised in the context of manual labour (work) is of supreme value.[55] Thus, the free individual is one who acts according to its ability to exercise sound judgment on a set of objective circumstances that pertain to an end goal.[56] What Weil wants to emphasize is the character of an action (in relation to thought) regardless of its outcome. That is to say, so long as the individual 'disposes of his own capacity for action', and furthermore, that the action corresponds to a particular thought then the consequences are immaterial.[57] The key is that no humiliation must come to a person's choice of action. If it does then a person's 'own life escapes not only out of his hands, but also out of the control of his intelligence. Instead of contriving and acting, one has to stoop to pleading or threatening'.[58] The soul is, therefore, subject to an innate level of humiliation, thereby losing not only its grip on freedom and thought, but more importantly, the state of its supreme dignity. Thought, in this context, is exercised in a vacuum, failing to 'seize hold of its objects'.[59]

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[54] Ibid., p. 99.
[55] Ibid., p. 98.
[56] In other words, 'a man would completely be a slave if all his movements proceeded from a source other than his mind, namely, either the irrational reactions of the body, or else the mind of other people', see ibid., p. 81. Weil goes on to identify key examples of this problem: 'the Roman slave complete keyed up to execute the orders of an overseer armed with a whip, [or] the manual worker of our own day engaged in a production line; all these approach that wretched condition'. Ibid., pp. 81-2.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., p. 99.

Faced with this indubitable problem, Weil attempts to sketch a rather pessimistic view of contemporary society. With power as a fundamental cause of oppression and the individual placing his focus upon extending both his power and knowledge indefinitely, the lack of human autonomy means that 'nearly everything nowadays is carried out methodically; science is king. [...] In reality methodical thought is progressively disappearing, owing to the fact that the mind finds less and less matter on which to bite'.[60] Why does Weil want the mind to bite on matter? Before exploring an answer here, there is an initial concern with her stamp on human freedom, humiliation and her solutions to the absence of thought in society that require further reflection.

Importantly, Weil's concept of human liberty lacks the necessary resources in which to transform the individual from a *state* of non-freedom to a *state* of freedom. In other words, she identifies what it is that will make the individual free, establishes what obstructs the fruition of that freedom, but offers little in the way of how a person attempts to respond to their particular situations that endeavour to establish their reality of freedom. In that case, there is no clear consideration or approach as to how one responds to an experience of 'humiliation'; rather the experience itself is displaced by a categorical imperative that one must not be humiliated at all costs regardless of the outcome of a given action. But this fails to address not only the fact that people do experience humiliation, but it goes no way to demonstrating the fact that people may experience humiliation in different ways. So far, not only does her theme of humiliation appear to be abstract and empty of substantial meaning, but it undermines the very driving force of autonomous thought in human freedom, not to mention, therefore, that it fails to provide any appropriate support for her notion of human liberty.[61]

But there is a deeper concern at stake, and for that to emerge, one has to incorporate the argument concerning humiliation within the structure of her thought-action model that establishes her notion of human freedom. The problem then is divided into two separate parts that illustrate an irresolvable contradiction between human freedom and humiliation. Firstly, Weil's insistence that an attitude of mutual respect within communal life aims to dispel acts of humiliation presuppose that there must be

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[60] Ibid., p. 103.
[61] Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*, p. 85.

some context in which there already is a level of social interaction amongst individuals in order for there to be any accountability of humiliation in the first place. And yet, secondly, the entire basis in which her concept of freedom is governed is without human beings intervening in one another's lives. Rather, freedom is understood through the relation between the individual and nature. Therefore, her case against humiliation cannot even begin because it has no substantial context in which to begin. It is no wonder that Winch asks the question: where does humiliation come from?[62] Given that the argument so far suggests that Weil's attention to the needs of the soul are becoming increasingly abstract and counterproductive, there is, perhaps, a more pressing concern with her notion of free action in human liberty that has to do with her overall objective in *Oppression and Liberty*. In order to outline this concern, one has to review her objective followed by an exploration of one further metaphysical theme that contributes to her notion of freedom, which is, the forces of nature within the 'individual-nature' relation.

Weil's explicit reflections on human impoverishment in 'Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression' are the result of primitive environmental and economic conditions that have made the individual 'less capable not only of subordinating their actions to their thoughts, but even of thinking'. This has meant that 'everything is disequilibrium'.[63] Briefly speaking, her task with *Oppression and Liberty* is to resurrect that active nature of the human being that aims to establish a sense of equilibrium amongst individuals and between the individual and nature.[64] Her idea of restoring balance to society is at the heart of her understanding of the human condition:

> The secret of the human condition is that equilibrium between man and the surrounding forces of nature "which infinitely surpass him" cannot by achieved by inaction; it is only achieved in the action by which man recreates his own life: that is to say by work.[65]

From this point of view in her *Notebooks* one has, in short, recognized that *Oppression and Liberty* is concerned to conceive of a reality where the essential nature of each individual is retained through a series of stable relations with other individuals and the

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[62] Ibid.
[63] OL, p. 102.
[64] See IC, pp. 24-55; Peter Winch, chapter 6.
[65] FLN, p. 18.

external world. These relations enable human action to be expressed in what Weil regards as the 'noblest forms of physical labour', that is to say, in work. But one has to be cautious here because she does not want to strictly establish a total utopian network of perfect, non-conflicting individual relations for 'there is no self-mastery without discipline and there is no other source of discipline for man that the effort demanded in overcoming obstacles'.[66] Rather, she wants to overturn obstacles between people that limit or suppress the active nature of a human being and distort the appropriateness of obstacles which are set in place to illuminate the essential nature of individuals as active creatures. These kinds of obstacles, essentially coming from nature, aim to resurrect the active mind in the world, which is why it is so important, says Weil, for the mind to find more and more matter on which to bite. But what are these essential obstacles coming from nature? And, returning to the same question raised earlier, why does Weil want human beings to bite on matter? In order to answer these queries, the discussion has to explore the role of the human being within nature and vice versa.

3.5 *The Relation between the Human Being and Nature*

To address these questions require some exploration into the role the human being and nature perform in relation to one another, followed by a brief assessment of this force of nature and its connection to human liberty. First, to bite on matter enables a person to make contact with nature, establish a sense of personal independence through thought, and create a set of conditions in one's existence that support the possibility of self-conquest. Second, the role of matter in this relationship brings to light a deeper metaphysical reality of how the natural world operates in itself, and in particular, how it impacts upon the livelihood of human beings. The true reality of the natural world, according to Weil, is built on an order of necessary relations, that is to say, a 'fabric of conditions knotted one with the others' to form a network of forces that govern the world and operate upon human beings.[67] These necessary relations represent what she calls 'necessity'.

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[66] OL, p. 80.
[67] IC, pp. 180-81.

But this web of relations has a double meaning, which Weil identifies with its fundamental role in the material world. Necessity, she says, is both morally and epistemologically important.[68] From the moral viewpoint, its absence through oppression suggests that so long as a person continues to represent 'an infinitesimal fraction of this pitiless universe, the pressure exerted by necessity will never be relaxed for one single moment'.[69] Necessity in adversities, privations, grief, and sufferings, makes it 'an absolute and brutal master'.[70] The shear weight of this force upon the slave, however, is the antithesis of how that force relates to the master situation. The 'man of power who lives only by his slaves', embraces a world where there is no check on his desires. Rather he is a prey to desires where the force of necessity never assigns any limits.[71] Clearly the disequilibrium in social relations corresponds to an imbalance in the perception and purpose assigned to necessity. Its moral significance, therefore, is understood by the way in which a perception of this force corresponds to the presence or absence of oppression. But outside oppression, its true purpose in the world is revealed where the 'relationship of necessity to the intelligence is not the relationship of the master to the slave'.[72] As essential matter, necessity here is 'both pure and conditional, the true object [...] of certain operations of thought' that enable the mind's contact with the world to emerge.[73] This kind of necessity reflects its epistemic importance. Free of the burden of oppression, the human being recognizes its capacity to act methodically, and therefore, under the control of its mind, how the obstacles of necessity provide it with 'means in relation to the partial ends which he pursues and wherein there is a sort of equality between a man's will and universal necessity'.[74] The desire, in other words, for there to be an active equilibrium between the individual and what she calls 'universal necessity' illustrates its moral and epistemic significance. In that case, necessity, she says, is either exercised or

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[68] Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 55.
[69] OL, p. 80.
[70] IC, p. 180.
[71] OL, p. 91.
[72] IC, p. 182.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., p. 180.

endured;[75] the basis of individual relations as well as individual-nature relations means that necessity has many contradictory faces.[76]

Yet, what are the practical ways whereby necessity is realized in the natural world? An answer for the moral aspect is explored through Weil's religious writings at a later stage, but the epistemic aspect of necessity, which aims to bring forward the essential nature of human beings through equilibrium between the individual and nature, is possible through the reality of work.[77] The organization of work, of technology, of all human activity in fact is an encounter with necessity. It is the means by which 'one must try to achieve this point of equilibrium as often as possible'.[78]

This is where work and manual labour are raised to the level of supreme value. An assessment of *Science et perception* elucidated in the previous chapter how work is a practical instrument by which the individual is able to make contact with the material world through its mind. Thinking intelligently as an independent being means that a person understands the truth about necessity through work so that external obstacles in this context enable, rather than disable, the individual to greater things in life. Therefore, human liberty is not just the relation between thought and methodical action,[79] but, in light of the epistemic importance of necessity, freedom is the ability for the individual to think in such a way that it understands not only the true meaning of necessity, but also that its mind gets to grips with necessity in a way that brings value to his or her existence. The ideal basis for society would therefore be:

> a form of material existence wherein only efforts exclusively directed by a clear intelligence would take place, which would imply that each worker himself had to control, without referring to any external rule, not only the adaption of his efforts to the piece of work to be produced, but also their coordination with the efforts of all the other members of the collectivity.[80]
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> If the foregoing analyses are correct, the most fully human civilization would be that which has manual labour as its pivot, that in which manual labour constituted the supreme value.[81]

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[75] GG, p. 38.
[76] Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil,* p. 130.
[77] Note: pick this up with the religious aspect, using her remarks from p 94)
[78] IC, p. 180.
[79] OL, p. 81.
[80] Ibid., p. 93.
[81] Ibid., p. 98.

A fully human civilization then is represented by the importance of a person in, rather than the product of, manual labour, which goes to explain why manual labour is of supreme value for Simone Weil. The question is: is the basis of this conclusion supported by the epistemic importance of necessity and, therefore, her notion of freedom?

3.6 *The Limitations of a Free Society*

As necessity merely aims to demonstrate whether or not Weil's notion of liberty is realized, the concern here, as I attempted to show earlier, is whether or not this notion is far too removed or isolated from the stream of human affairs. Human liberty is possible when every action is free and therefore methodical, that is, every act proceeds from a preliminary judgment concerning a set goal in mind, followed by the means by which that particular goal is realized. By thinking and acting freely in this manner, the individual is no longer compelled to submit blindly to the external pressures of necessity, but choose, through its actions, to find and form an 'inner representation' of it in the mind. This contrast in the experience of necessity, says Weil, is the difference between servitude and liberty.[82] In summary, to act freely requires an 'inner representation' and a 'preliminary judgment'. In other words, freedom as the relation between thought and action is only apparent to the person directly involved in this inner relation. But there is no direct relation to the manner in which one person relates to another in the life of the polis, since the life of the individual is a continual creation of itself for itself.[83] This problem is compounded even further when her concept of necessity struggles to operate appropriately within and through social relations because the only true relationship for freedom, and therefore, necessity, is between the individual and nature that resides outside of any kind of social relation. But as Winch says, 'to talk about an organization of society is again to talk about *necessitites*'. Considered as individuals, people are just as much subject to social necessities imposed by the division of labour as they are to

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[82] Ibid., p. 81.
[83] Ibid., p. 83. See also, Peter Winch, *Simone Weil: The Just Balance*, p. 85.

necessities of nature.[84] By implication, why is it that a person cannot come to understand the truth about necessity in which ever form it chooses to present itself?

Weil's emphasis is to focus all intellectual and industrial concerns on the nature of human beings, but the individual is only indirectly the center of her social theory; her immediate intellectual preoccupation is with the state. It seems then that any real hope of transforming the condition of human misfortune is only possible until such time that alterations to the social and political system are addressed in order for meaningful relations to transpire between the individual and its environment. But this goes no way to understanding how the individual attempts to address its current situation, and since, as Weil says, the collective is bigger and more mysterious than any one human being within it,[85] what hope do the misfortunate have at coming to terms with their experiences. Without the burden of oppression, and therefore, without the difficulty of human relations, necessity and freedom become an impersonal feature of her metaphysical writings that are essentially exclusive to and a measure by which human beings come to recognize their freedom. But this basis of freedom and representation of necessity bears no weight to the actual conditions in which human beings find themselves.

While Weil is so intent upon liberating the misfortunate from their social situation, the irony is that her metaphysical ideas, so far, only attempt to explicitly present an ideal context of the world rather than a precise context in which the world exists. This is the implication of Winch's analysis of Weil's concept of freedom. Her account of the relation between thought and action (freedom) seems to 'make no room for two such agents to *know* the reality of the other, let alone respect it'.[86] Thus, it becomes impossible for her to even begin to consider any real social relations when, as he continues to suggest, 'very little is said about the character of the human reactions to other human beings, from which springs the conception of human beings as belonging to a community'.[87]

As Weil, however, continues to further explore the possibility of a free society, she is well aware of the limitations that make such a task almost impossible to achieve.

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., p. 97.
[86] Ibid., p. 87.
[87] Peter Winch, p. 83.

With her intellectual focus on human liberty, she constructs an ideal reality that would be conducive to the appropriate workings of her analysis of the social system. Ultimately, her 'utopia' is one where co-operation amongst human beings would be 'the sovereign law, and where each would be able to understand clearly and to verify the connection between the rules to which his life was subjected and the public interest'.[88] She recognizes though that such a picture is far removed from real social relations, but that such a vision 'is able to serve, by way of an ideal, as a standard for the analysis and evaluation of actual social relations'.[89]

Perhaps realizing the impossibility of human freedom, the last section of her essay entitled, 'Sketch of Contemporary Social Life', returns to a similar theme at the start of her analysis of the polis. Her view of contemporary society is pessimistic and far removed from the free society she envisions above. But in spite of the fact society has failed to draw any value into the life of the individual, she maintains the importance of the power of thought and a utopia of individual co-operation and mutual respect.[90] Such extreme contrasts throughout this essay, however, tally with what McLellan calls 'a tone of implacability running through *Oppression and Liberty*, a tone which springs from a combination of her extreme individualism with an equally extreme intellectualism'.[91] Furthermore, her utopia elucidates a deepening concern that while her thoughts flow into and through her actions, the relation between thought and action is an inner, etheric relation that fails to effectively engage with actual events in the material world. Consequently, when there is no invested interest as to how a human being attempts to negotiate with and through the difficulties of its predicament in the polis, the respective ambitions of each person and their situation becomes a potential threat to another.[92]

The basis of this threat between individuals, however, is counter to her basic social theory. What this means, as Winch argues, is that human life is governed by this on-going repetitive cycle between those that dominate and those who submit. Human relations, according to Winch, will never constitute equilibrium. 'Somebody's nature will

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[88] OL, p. 101.
[89] Ibid., p. 91.
[90] Ibid., pp. 115-17.
[91] David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, p. 125.
[92] See LP, pp. 20-1.

always be violated'.[93] In that case, can any relation ever be in perfect equilibrium without undermining the kind of individual autonomy Weil was so desperate to bring forward into the world? And indeed, if there is no such thing as a 'perfect equilibrium', then how can her notion of human freedom and necessity, indeed her vision of utopia, have any relevance to actual social relations? If her notion of freedom, on the one hand, aims to revive the essential nature of individuals through this exclusive exchange between human beings and nature and, on the other hand, her vision of utopia rests upon her principle of equilibrium where each individual refrains from violating the other's reality, then how it is possible for Weil to bring into the forum of her discussion any kind of ideal that addresses real social relations when the basis of that ideal has no substantial grounds in which to relate the freedom of one individual to the freedom of another?

This is a particularly difficult problem for her to resolve when her entire thesis on human liberty is primarily an exclusive affair. To address these questions will, however, have further significance in terms of exploring them in relation to the life and works of Gillian Rose. For re-examining Weil's comprehension of social relations and her dilemma between individual self-identity and collective belonging will reach a greater degree of clarity through an inquiry into Gillian Rose's philosophical understanding of social relations through 'friendship'. For the basis of friendship, for Rose, attempts to draw a correlation between human relations and the effects of reason within modern thought in order to illuminate the false presuppositions and generalizations that individuals make about one another.[94] Furthermore, the contention that Weil's approach to the inner workings of the misfortunate is exclusively internal, individualistic and abstract, reflect a more deepening metaphysical worry that the basis of her conception of God, creation and the relationship between the human and divine is permanently divided. In that case, whilst the investigation will resurface Weil's conception of social relations in relation to the works of Rose, the discussion has now reached a prime opportunity in which to discuss wholeheartedly her religious writings, in particular, her mid-life experiences that consider in detail her conception of God through Descartes and Plato, the nature of contradiction, the void and the human condition. Beforehand, though, the

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[93] Peter Winch, p. 87.
[94] See JM, pp. 1ff.

investigation briefly establishes a foundation in which to bridge the link between her social and political preoccupations, and the development of her religious aspirations for the salvation of the human soul.

3.7 *Uncovered: The Tension between The Human and the Divine*

Several inquiries so far has addressed Simone Weil's fundamental intellectual preoccupations with her personal experiences representing the source of her inquiries. The aim now is to begin to explore the tension within her thoughts in the aftermath of *Oppression and Liberty* and her factory experiences, namely, in a period of her life where her personal encounters with the world and beyond dominated her intellectual focus. What is becoming increasingly evident though is the way in which Weil's experience of the world elucidates the context, structure and nature of her thoughts. One key example from this chapter and previously is the correlation between several of her early childhood experiences and the implications of those events in *Science et perception*, *Oppression and Liberty* and her factory experiences between 1934 and 1935. There is no doubt that in these discussions and several key commentaries on Simone Weil's life and work, that there are these close connections between her personal vocation and intellectual pursuits.[95] In order to closely examine Simone Weil through these connections, one has to inquire into the deeper avenues of the person behind the intellect that, in short, help to establish the link between her social and political concerns with the later domination of her religious aspirations. For to journey into Weil's reality is not merely to consider her entirely as an intellect, but as her philosophy dictates, as a fusion of thought and practice, intellect and experience, religion and politics. Though the discussion has focused on the strengths and weaknesses of key experiential and intellectual sources of her work, the intention now is to take the investigation into a closer understanding of these aspects directly in relation to Simone Weil herself, and importantly, in relation to her religious and mystical work. Beforehand though, what has been the larger motif for assessing Weil's social and political themes?

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[95] See, for example, George Abbott White, *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981);

Firstly, 'Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression' ultimately highlight the tension between individual self-identity and the identity of the contemporary world. That is to say, earlier comments on Weil's 'Analysis of Oppression' showed how the current state of industry and social relations would appear to make the individual a slave and servitude his natural condition.[96] Yet, her sketch of a theoretical picture of a free society requires the implementation of social and political change that opposes this condition of servitude and establishes the possibility of human liberty. This tension and contradiction between servitude and liberty is a broad representation of the human condition,[97] and Weil toils with this tension up to and including the last section of her essay where she describes how the actual condition of contemporary society makes human liberty almost impossible. She continues that order is increasingly being replaced by chaos because the present social system 'provides no means of action other than machines for crushing humanity; whatever may be the intention of those who use them, these machines crush and will continue to crush so long as they exist'.[98] Thus, 'perfect liberty' is something that can be regarded as an ideal in public life.[99]

Therefore, what Weil's social and political preoccupations reflect, which is further evident in terms of her factory experiences, is the tension between the individual and the collective, what Mary Dietz calls 'the dilemma of worldliness', that is, the tension between individual autonomy and collective belonging, between "I" and "We".[100] With regards to the aspect of 'collective belonging', Dietz focuses on the side of Weil's personal sense of worthlessness and inferiority (highlighted, for example, in her adolescent crisis) and her desperate need 'to find strength and support in some sort of collectivity'.[101] While I aim to refer to this term and its context, which rests primarily upon Dietz's earlier psychological analysis of Weil's 'individual and collective identity' problem,[102] I intend to add a further point to this 'dilemma of worldliness' by suggesting that Weil not only had a need to belong, but that such a need was against an equally strong desire for the welfare of others, particularly, their freedom and self-identity. The

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[96] OL, p. 31.
[97] Ibid., p. 70.
[98] Ibid., p. 112.
[99] Ibid., p. 83.
[100] BHD, p. 14.
[101] Ibid., pp. 14-15.
[102] See ibid., chapter 1.

combination of both these desires taken together helps to explain the degree of revulsion she felt and experienced towards society and collectivities. In this regard, Dietz's expression is particularly relevant to Weil's inner conflicts and dilemmas with the world, which are intended to be useful for exploring her religious aspirations. Reflecting upon a much broader issue, however, that incorporates Dietz's 'dilemma of worldliness', there is also the tension between individual autonomy and collective heteronomy, that is, a conflict between individual freedom and the subordination of human beings to an external social order that threatens that freedom. To alternate between these two different meanings, the investigation incorporates a more impersonal expression, namely, 'the tension within worldliness'.

In the latter case, one precise example from *Oppression and Liberty* occurs between Weil's belief that work should be an education for the individual,[103] and yet, work as a division of labour leads one person to making the product whilst another person thinking of how to put it together. Through her analysis, a division of labour is where the problem resides, that is to say, work through industrial specialization and modern technology itself is the cause of human exploitation. As identified earlier though, the consequences of this social theory are that it fails to adequately address the human element that drives the reality of work itself. Weil's 'tension within worldliness' is not something workable, but simply and solely a model in which to simply reflect a threat posed by oppressive regimes toward the nature of human autonomy.[104] This goes some way to explaining McLellan's point that the extreme opposites then between her vision of a free society, on the one hand, and the reality of society, on the other, means that Weil's analysis of oppression is 'a stark contrast between Utopia and dystopia'.[105]

An alternative perspective on the 'tension within worldliness' appears through Weil's interpretation of Hegel's dialectic as a series of contradictions within human life that generally progress towards spiritual perfection.[106] This dialectic, she says, is a means by which Hegel accounts for the history of the world as a 'hidden mind at work in the

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[103] SL, p. 34.
[104] BHD, p. 15.
[105] David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, p. 92.
[106] OL, p. 43.

universe' that passes through a series of contradictions 'indefinitely toward perfection'.[107] Therefore, the master-slave relation by this token would appear to observe the value of human relations as something that brings forward the essential qualities of a human being.[108] For Weil, the aim is not about the purpose of this relation, but that the 'master' needs to change itself in order to establish for the 'slave' an opportunity to find an identity. Yet, this still keeps the 'slave' in dependence while its 'master' as the 'We' is expected to accommodate the manifestation of the 'I' of human freedom. This, as suggested earlier, renders the 'I' motionless and inactive, and more dangerously, in bondage to the 'We' who has to make its mark in order for the 'I' to find liberation. Indeed, Weil became convinced of the inevitable docility of 'the French working class not only for revolution but for any action'. I think it is only the bourgeois who could have any illusion in this matter'.[109] Oppressive regimes, she argues, make revolution and action appear impossible.[110] But, then, the possibility that Weil's social theory attempts to resurrect the essential nature of an active human being cannot even begin because the 'I' has become immobilized in and subordinated through its relation to the 'We' of her 'tension'.

In Weil's later writings though, particularly *The Need for Roots*, she gives a more mature expression to the importance of communal belonging and how social relations have to be a source of earthly roots in order to attend to the needs of the soul.[111] The significance of having roots in the world is an attempt, she says, for the human being to belong to a collectivity and establish the opportunity to live a fully human life. Thus, Dietz's 'dilemma' highlights the drama between her earlier and later political views. But the problem Weil still faces is how to relate the 'I' and the 'We' together in the dilemma of and tension within worldliness. Earlier mention of her struggle to find any self-worth in friendship, in addition to the worthlessness behind her adolescent crisis and her increasing desires to change what she objected to so deeply in the social system, elucidate the growing realization that her dilemma of and tension within worldliness ultimately reflect her struggle to belong, her struggle to find an identity of self, and most

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[107] Ibid., pp. 42-3.
[108] David McLellan, p. 107.
[109] See David McLellan, p. 109. See also, SL, p. 35, 40.
[110] SL, p. 35.
[111] Ibid.

significantly of all, her struggle to intellectually determine how others can do the same within their lives. Thus, the 'tension' and 'dilemma' are reflected in both Weil's intellectual and personal concerns, and in that case, as I alluded to earlier, can there ever be any relation in the world that is in perfect equilibrium?

In light of the concern associated with her theme of perfection in liberty and equilibrium, the second reason for exploring her social and political ideas has to do with her dilemma between the human and divine. The intention to establish perfect equilibrium within human relations in *Oppression and Liberty*, for example, underpins a deeper, religious principle in operation that is intended to illuminate human beings to Weil's immaterial world.[112] This principle concerns the universal attainment of truth, which chapter II illustrated through the background of her adolescent crisis. In *Oppression and Liberty*, therefore, her conception of a utopia is based on a religious belief that all human beings are one,[113] which means that individuals should 'never be treated by each other as things. Each would see in each workfellow another self occupying another post, and would love him in the way that the Gospel maxim enjoins'.[114] This maxim refers to the commandment in Christianity to love your neighbour as yourself,[115] and in the aftermath of *Oppression and Liberty*, Weil applied for a leave of absence from teaching to join the factory workers where she attempted to fuse the 'spiritual' and the 'political', that is to say, to bring to life the possibility of this Gospel message within human relations in the polis.[116]

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[112] What is interesting to note is that even though Weil's life was so profoundly changed after her conversion experiences, she never lost sight her interests in manual labour. For, perhaps, one of the most striking themes that will come to light in her religious writings is how she never entirely abandoned her interests in the organisation of labour. As it will be shown how Greek philosophy strongly impacts upon the religious dimension of Weil's thinking, what will also be identified is how, according to Weil, the Greeks failed to recognise the importance of labour, and her belief that manual labour is the foundation of any genuine spiritual life because it represents the point at which the worker has direct and immediate contact with the material reality of the world. See J. P. Little, *Simone Weil: Waiting on Truth* (Oxford: Berg, 1988), pp. 112ff.

[113] OL, p. 100.

[114] Ibid., p. 94.

[115] In her essay, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God', Weil refers to the 'love of our neighbor' as 'a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, [...], but as a man, exactly like us'. With regards to the wider application of human suffering, this will be explored through her religious writings. See WFG, p. 114, pp. 139-157.

[116] This has led commentators like Mary Dietz to argue that there is no clear division between Weil's spiritual and political ambitions. 'We cannot rightly say that Weil moved from a "political" to a "spiritual" phase' because the text, *The Need for Roots*, is a clear continuation of her concern for the individual within

But the difficulties that have arisen from *Oppression and Liberty* allude to a fundamental premise in which all her notions to liberate the poor and oppressed, for example, reside. At the heart of her intellect is the resounding tone of her adolescent crisis where the nature of truth resides not only within a transcendental realm beyond the affairs of this world, but that truth is universally accessible to all and attainable by all. This experience is the source in which her social and political premises aim to transform existing societies and the reality of the human situation; where her notions of human liberty, necessity and humiliation have been separated from human life. What came with her adolescent experience though was also a sense of mediocrity, worthlessness, and above all, a fear of being excluded from a 'transcendent kingdom' to which her brother André had sole access. These experiences and what prevails with the difficulties of her social and political ideas, allude to her absorption with an alternative 'kingdom', a world whereby she escaped from the problem of self-identity and communal belonging.[117] Such a world means that Weil not only suffers with a 'dilemma of worldliness' but also with a 'dilemma of worldlessness'. That is to say, Weil came to work with a spiritual world that was both beyond the 'I' and the 'We', a world that places the individual into exile and ideas into an impersonal dimension. What this means is that apart from the struggle to come to terms with the tension between individual self-identity and collective belonging, Weil also recognized 'the need to choose between "the human and the divine"'.[118] The next section moves from Weil's dilemma of worldliness into examining her 'dilemma of worldlessness', which begins by sourcing her conception of God, her notion of contradiction through Descartes and Plato, and how the tension which resided earlier in the contradiction between the individual and the collective, now appears as a fundamental contradiction between the human and the divine.

3.8 *Weil's Concept of God through Descartes*

There is no dispute that Weil not only engineered a mystical theology of God through her philosophical and scientific inquiries, but she equally came into contact with the divine

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the polis and the importance of being rooted in communal life, see BHN, p. 125. See also David McLellan, p. 116.

[117] See BHD, chapter 2.

[118] BDH, p. 24.

through mystical experience.[119] Though she gives no explicit definition of mysticism, generally speaking, her assumption is that it represents an immediate consciousness of the transcendent or ultimate reality of God, and involves the practice of putting oneself into, and remaining in, direct relation with the Absolute or with any unifying principle of life.[120] In the context of her thoughts, however, the term is specifically associated with her experiences of Christianity as an intense and explicit awareness of the divine, and simultaneously, of God's absence from human comprehension and experience.[121] Other theologians have often articulated this as the unknowability of the divine.[122] But this absence of God simply alludes to the incompleteness of human knowledge about the transcendent world, and Weil expresses this reality through a metaphor of darkness and emptiness – the void.[123] Though the framework and structure of her understanding here will unravel a little later, what has to be addressed is how her thoughts and experiences are transformed from her earlier intellectual preoccupations to more intense religious and spiritual themes that are primarily concerned for the salvation of the human soul.

At the time in which she wrote *Science et perception*, Weil not only had a deep sense of mistrust for modern scientific empiricism, but at the start of her essay, she alludes to a dislike of priests, theologians and bourgeois elitists. Like Descartes, her initial conception of God was an abstract object of philosophical reflection, that is, a

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[119] Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 94. This experience of the mystery of the divine refers to several key conversion or religious experiences that took place in Weil's life during 1937 and 1938. Recorded in her 'Spiritual Autobiography', her immediate contact with God is an attempt to elucidate forthcoming discussions into her metaphysical and religious thoughts. See WFG, pp. 61-83.

[120] A good example of this can be found in Weil's 'Spiritual Autobiography'. After her year of factory work and between 1937 and 1938, Weil narrates her most personal and direct contact with God. These accounts will be addressed in forthcoming discussions of her metaphysical and religious thoughts. In the meantime, see WG, pp. 66-70.

[121] This intense knowing of God for Simone Weil unfolds by way of several key life experiences that are juxtaposed with an equally intense unknowing of God which she expresses conceptually in her writings. These intense experiences of God will be discussed in due course, but they primarily centre on Weil's increasing concern with spiritual living and values towards the end of the 1930s, and in particular, elements of Christian thought that began to emerge in her writings. For further details, see her 'Spiritual Biography' in WG, pp. 61-83. Coupled with the conceptual influence from both Descartes and Plato that the divine resides outside of the material world, Weil's religious writings already allude to an innate tension in the relationship between the human and divine world.

[122] See Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*, trans. Haralambos Ventis (London: T & T Clark, 2005), pp. 83-110.

[123] PT, p. 41. See also, FLN, p. 124, 139, 309-10, 349. For an excellent discussion on the unknown God in Weil's writings, see also, Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutierrez*, pp. 45-73.

transcendent, omnipotent being that 'remains beyond man'.[124] Pétrement's analysis of *Science et perception* brings to light a more detailed account of Weil's comprehension of God through Descartes. According to Pétrement's reading of both thinkers, 'God is defined by his all-powerfulness rather than by his benevolence, goodness, and perfection'.[125] The all-powerful status of the divine is to show that God, for both Weil and Descartes, is not dependent on the external world. In fact, as Mclellan sees it, 'he needed God simply to set the world in motion and then be forgotten'.[126] What perhaps may be understood as a link between this image and Weil's compelling determination to drive her mystical awareness into the lives of the oppressed, has to with other drafts on the subject of the God of Descartes that Pétrement uncovers among Weil's dissertation manuscripts.[127]

Apart from siding with his fundamental reading that the divine is ultimately omnipotent and transcendent, Weil also reads his God as 'not the God of the theologians' but what is God-like in the human being.[128] The idea that every person has an inner infallible aspect that is divine brings to light the force that drives her belief in the universal accessibility of truth and her mission to uplift the misfortunate. But this eternal part that connects the human being to God is realized through the essence of thought. Here, Weil is reluctant to be unfaithful to Descartes because he clearly would have forbidden any level of affinity between God and the human mind.[129] But the infallible aspect in a human being fails to depart from Weil's consciousness, and, as it will become clearer through the duration of this chapter, this aspect becomes the focus of her exploration in the relationship between human beings and God.

Therefore, her initial conception of God, which is shown, on the one hand, to be conceptual, philosophical and external in her dissertation, but on the other, internal and relational in light of other drafts of her reading of Descartes' theology, shows that the

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[124] P, p. 68.
[125] Ibid., p. 65.
[126] David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, p. 29.
[127] P, p. 66.
[128] Ibid., pp. 66-7.
[129] Ibid., pp. 67-8.

divine reality was subject to further exploration.[130] In other words, this dual understanding of God helps to explain how earlier explorations of the divine in her essay would lead to later developments of her understanding of the supernatural reality in her *Notebooks*. Furthermore, what became part of the development from an external to an internal comprehension of God would also correspond to an intellectual transition from Descartes to another formidable philosophical figure, Plato. Through her mature religious, social and political ideas, Weil's use of Plato would be a lifelong affair[131] to understand the relationship between the human and divine reality. Her use of Plato in this relationship will be explored in due course, but the important point to address here is how her use of these earlier philosophical figures corresponds to the development of her experiences and intellectual ideas about the transcendent realms.

Though I have shown Weil's broader use of Platonic thought in earlier chapters as the basis of her use of contradiction and understanding of God, forthcoming investigations do not intend to cover all of her associations with Plato – this does not satisfy the inquires taking place in this thesis – but to show how he is instrumental to key developments of Weil's religious works. Her deep intellectual indebtedness to Plato has undergone several detailed commentaries over the years.[132] To examine her metaphysical and religious ideas is possible in terms of outlining Plato's conception of the divine and the way it relates to the world. But, more importantly, addressing her religious and spiritual preoccupations will precede with an exploration into another dimension of Plato's thought – his political philosophy – and how Weil uses it to expand her own religious concerns for the individual that corresponds to her growing antagonism towards the state.[133] Given that the broader aspects of the investigation in this chapter have

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[130] Both McLellan and Pétrement highlight how the concept of God at the time in which she wrote her thesis was 'an ideal model of knowledge and liberty' so that believing in God was for Weil simply a matter of acting correctly. See David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, p. 30; P, pp. 68-9.

[131] See LP, p. 219; Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, pp. 16-17.

[132] See, for example, Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*; Michael Narcy, 'The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil's Platonism', *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, pp. 23-42; Miklos Vetö, *The Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dargan.

[133] Weil's criticisms of the social order, for example, the way in which modern industrial conditions destroy work as an exercise of thought, is further bolstered by her adaptation of Plato's conception of the 'Great Beast' which facilitates the development of his philosophy of justice in the *Republic*. The 'Great Beast', which represents the democratic assembly of Athens, appears in Book VII where Plato, through his interlocutor, Socrates, aims to establish examples of unjust societies and unjust individuals. The final

focused on Weil's social and collective hostility, it is, perhaps, essential to identify how Plato and her reservations towards the Catholic Church are instrumental in the development of her religious and mystical preoccupations with the world.

3.9 *Weil's Theology and her Use of Plato*

3.9.1 Weil's Religious Thought in Secular Life

Clearly, there is nothing original in the claim that Weil is a Platonist. Her belief in the Idea of the Good, the supreme metaphysical principle at the apex of Plato's metaphysical hierarchy, is a transcendental reality that is unknowable, but at the same time, a synthesizing tool that makes it possible for all things to be interconnected in this world.[134] What now has to emerge in the final section of this chapter is the identification of Weil's use of Plato in her writings. One has to understand why she uses Platonic thought to further her own religious and spiritual preoccupations, followed by, examining whether her use of his ideas are fruitful to her interests of nurturing the divine in and through the material world.

In the broadest sense, Weil wanted to find an expression of divine love in human misery, which meant that she wanted to show how Greek thought elucidates the importance of the Incarnation in terms of mediating divine reality in and through the world, i.e. Christ represents the relationship between human suffering and the Love of God, or to put it plainly, shows how the crucified Christ joins the opposites of God and the world.[135] The question is, however, whether the development of her theology is strictly in contact with this reconciliation, and indeed, whether her interpretation and use of Plato, and moreover, her interpretation of the Incarnation through the Ancient world, strictly speaking, corresponds to the teachings of Orthodox Christianity, particularly since

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sections of this chapter will focus on Weil's use of Plato's political philosophy to further her own cause against what she sees as the 'Great Beast' in modern day French society. See OL, p. 165ff.

[134] As Plato says, the Good is 'beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power'. Plato, *The Republic*, 509 B.

[135] For a good discussion of this point, see William S. Bush, 'The Love of God and Man's Suffering: Simone Weil and Georges Bernanos', *The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 185-196 (pp. 192-94); Melville Chaning-Pearce, 'Christianity's Crucial Conflict, The Case of Simone Weil', *Hibbert Journal* 14 (1950-51), 333-40.

she displayed deep reservations against the Roman Catholic Church.[136] In that case, to continue with this theme of Weil's hostility towards social institutions, it would now be worth considering whether her use of Plato to link the supernatural with the natural world[137] is overshadowed by the development of her religious and spiritual aspirations for the human being in the world.

Prior to the development of her religious concerns, however, Weil was not just content to settle with recognizing divine love in human suffering; what she also had in mind was to infuse spiritual values into mainstream secular life. As earlier discussions have attempted to evaluate her thoughts on justice and equality through every level of society, and in many ways, to pursue the course of individual thought and the importance of work for the cause of human freedom, it would then appear unsurprising to find that her religious preoccupations follow a similar sentiment. As she came to realize through her adolescent crisis that all human beings have the capacity to universally attain truth, indeed, her religious aspirations are concerned to illustrate that divine truth is accessible to all human beings through other religious traditions. But this religious conviction has brought to light not only her growing hostility towards industry and labour, but as it will become clearer, her growing reservations towards institutional religion, particularly, the Roman Catholic Church. Where the time line of this chapter ended around the time of her factory years, I now aim to jump ahead of her conversion experiences (though aiming to lead the discussion towards these encounters in due course) in order now to reflect upon

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[136] This point of their being remarkable differences between Platonic thought and Christianity are crucial to understanding Weil's type of 'Christianity'. For details on these differences, see Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, pp. xiii-xiv, 75ff. At certain stages over the next two chapters, I will outline some of these differences, but the important point to realise is that Weil's 'Christianity' was not clearly defined in terms of her allegiance to Church dogma; rather, her understanding of the Incarnation was heavily drawn from Plato and Greek thought in general, in addition to non-Christian religions of Ancient Egypt, Buddhism, and, in particular, Hinduism. For further details, see LTAP, pp. 1ff; David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, pp. 211-219.

[137] See, for example, Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*; Miklos Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil,* trans. Joan Dargan. Whilst this link established by Weil will be shown to be based upon a rather unusual approach to Plato, Iris Murdoch alludes to the idea that her reading of Plato is heavily influenced by earlier explorations of French philosophy during the late 19th and early 20th century that aimed to direct the world of value towards mainstream life. In response to Weil's relentless determination to mediate supreme, absolute thought through to the afflicted and oppressed, Murdoch points out that it is the 'quality of this striving that might justify the title "existentialist" – although the sources of her thought in ancient philosophy are far from the customary origins of existentialism'. See Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin books, 1997), p.157

Weil's position over the Church in *A Letter to a Priest*, which she composed during her exile in New York in 1942.[138]

The beginning of this letter, written to the Catholic Priest, Pére Couterier, gets to the heart of Weil's dilemma:

> 'When I read the catechism of the Council of Trent, it seems as though I had nothing in common with the religion there set forth. When I read the New Testament, the mystics, the Liturgy, when I watch the celebration of the Mass, I feel with a sort of conviction that this faith is mine, or to be more precise, would be mine without the distance placed between it and me by my imperfection'.[139]

Without providing an exhaustive analysis of Weil's dilemma with the Church, her basic argument was against what she understood as a limitation and an unnecessary demand on religious dogma that was not essential to the fundamental message of Christianity:

> 'Of course I knew quite well that my conception of life was Christian. That is why it never occurred to me that I could enter the Christian community. I had the idea that I was born inside. But to add dogma to this conception of life, without being forced to do so by indisputable evidence, would have seemed to me a lack of honesty'.[140]

Clearly, one can recognize the tension between Weil's desire to belong to the Christian community, but equally, the intensity of her thoughts that separated her from the Church. Her summary of this tension is clearly elucidated through what is clearly recognized as her Christ-centeredness, her belief that is, in the inspiration of Christ and its roots in the whole universe of human experience. For Weil, there were two central themes to her confrontation with the Church.

Firstly, she noticed that in terms of the history of humanity there was no significant difference in human conduct prior to and in the aftermath of the life of Jesus.[141] In that case, the essence of Christianity existed before Christ given that the advent of Jesus' life made little difference to the nature of human affairs. Moreover, and

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[138] See LTAP, pp. 1ff; GaG, pp. 103-147.
[139] LTAP, p. 9.
[140] WFG, p. 22.
[141] At the beginning of the *Letter*, Weil argues that 'if we take a moment in history anterior to Christ and sufficiently remote from him – for example, five centuries before his time – and we set aside what follows afterwards, at that moment Israel has less of a share in God and in Divine Truth that several of the surrounding peoples (India, Egypt, Greece, China)'. See GaG, p. 105.

this brings to light her desire to fuse Israel with Greece, the contemporary world failed to recognize this point in light of having abandoned, what Weil considers, the relation between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the secular.

> 'If there is a watertight division between antiquity and Christianity, the same watertight division exists between our profane life and our spiritual life. For Christianity to become truly incarnated, for the whole of life to become permeated by the Christian inspiration, it must first of all be recognized that, historically, our profane civilization is derived from a religious inspiration, which although chronologically pre-Christian, was Christian in essence'.[142]

This suggestion of fusing together the religious and secular dimensions of human reality is Weil's attempt to illustrate that each of the world religions is a fragment of a much larger whole, and each is a legitimate expression of approaching God.[143] By implication, the missionary activity of the Church fails to pay adequate attention to the explicit truths of other religions which Christianity has only implicitly. [144] Since it has abandoned the legacy of Greece, eternity, through Christianity, cannot be found in chronology.

3.9.2 The Sources of Weil's Conception of God

Paralleled to this theme, which in essence is to fuse together spiritual and secular life, is the second theme of Weil's *Letter* that is concerned to emphasize the dangers of religious totalitarianism, that is to say, the superiority of one religious faith over and above other religious belief systems. In many ways, what promotes this totalitarian attitude, according to Weil, is that the traditional Catholic view of faith is far too intellectual. If one recalls Weil's earlier reservations against the division of labour between those that do the thinking and those that implement the ideas into the action of labour, corresponds to similar reservations against the employment of the *anathema sit* and to the absurdities in the doctrine of salvation outside the church.[145] The mysteries of the Christian faith, Weil recognizes, 'can and have been used, by the shrewd manipulation of the anathema, for the

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[142] Ibid., p. 109.
[143] Ibid., p. 122.
[144] Ibid., p. 105.
[145] What Weil means by this is that religious totalitarian systems, such as the Roman Catholic Church, control their flock through a mechanism that corresponds to the Church's mode of excommunication – known as *anathema sit*. See FLN, pp. 110-117; Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 141.

total enslavement of minds'.[146] In which case, if the Church decided to administer the sacraments without exercising tyranny over people's souls, the Christian faith could be more easily placed within and accessible to the center of secular life, and 'could impregnate everything, absolutely everything, with its light'.[147] Until such a proclamation could be made, Weil remained reluctant for the duration of her life to accept baptism with a clear conscience.

First of all, one can clearly see that she struggled to find the essence of Christianity in Roman Catholicism, and that her conception of God was wholeheartedly committed to interreligious dialogue. There is not doubt the seriousness of Weil's intention to drive home divine revelation outside of the Church. She went to great lengths, for example, to learn Sanskrit in order to study the Hindu Scriptures,[148] studied Babylonian, and used precepts of Buddhism, Taoism, and many other religions in her writings. Secondly, an account of the intense juxtaposition of her religious experiences of 1937 and 1938 and what emerged as an intellectual vocation to make sense of those experiences in relation to human misery, brought about her vocation not only with the limitations of institutional Christianity, but deeper appreciations of the mysticism of Christian belief that included non-Christian sources of religious truth.[149] With a view that the Catholic faith was too intellectual, and in particular, too exclusive, what are the sources of Weil's conception of God?

Weil's affection for the Greek civilization, particularly Plato,[150] occupies a central place in both her intellectual development and her growth toward Christianity. The end of this chapter and Chapter IV will evaluate these sources in Weil's religious work. In addition to her use of Platonic thought, there was also a specific attempt to overcome the accusations against Platonism and Christian mysticism of minimizing the suffering of

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[146] FLN, p. 109.
[147] GaG, p. 74.
[148] The Story of Krishna, for instance, as well as those of the life and death of Jesus, reveals God sacrificing himself for human beings out of love. Everything that reflected this understanding of God, was, for Weil, Christian in essence, belonging to the Christian inspiration even if it antedated the history of Christianity, see FLN, p. 80.
[149] Some of these religious themes will be explored through Weil's N, IC, and SNL.
[150] After all, in her essay on the *Iliad*, she emphasizes the similarity between the spirit of the Greeks and the spirit of the Gospels. See IC, p. 52.

historical conflict, oppression and exploitation.[151] Furthermore, where Christian theologians have criticized the Greeks for the way in which their notion of God is distanced from humanity,[152] Weil sees this distance as God not necessarily being affected by what human beings do in the world. What this aims to provoke is the idea that God and humanity can be united, but whatever uniting takes place, according to Weil, does so across an inherent void between the human and the divine. She wanted to juxtapose mystical consciousness with an awareness of the dark and destructive presence of human history.[153] But in response to the widespread belief that Platonic thought is inherently dualistic,[154] all Greek civilization, including Plato, she says, 'is a search for bridges that relate human misery to divine perfection'.[155] In that case, it remains unsurprising for Weil to consider Plato a mystic given that of them, in practice, evoke what Evelyn Underhill spoke of as the mystics' 'impassioned love of the Absolute [...] which transcends the dogmatic language in which it is clothed and becomes applicable to mystics of every race and creed'.[156] Similarly, in her *Letter*, she acknowledges how the mystics belong to nearly all the religious traditions, representing the truth in each case.[157]

In contradictory terms, Weil's intention to inquire into the mystery of God is facilitated by the importance of holding together, simultaneously, the immanence and transcendence of God in her reading of Plato. What requires further investigation is whether the shear weight of her emphasis on the transcendence of the divine and the sole recognition of God's love in human suffering altered this balance in any way.

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[151] The mystic scholar Baron von Hügel, insists that mysticism must be cautious not to become too optimistic and ahistorical so as to avoid the 'harder and hardest trials of every conceivable kind, and the unshrinking, full acceptance of these, as part of the price of conscience and of its growing light, have ever been the occasions of the deepest trust in and love of God to which man has attained'. See Baron von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion*, vol. 2 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1908), p. 291.

[152] A very good example of this is Andres Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (New York: Harper and How, 1969). For a critical commentary on Nygren's attack on Greek philosophy, see Eric O. Springsted, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil*, pp. 152-55.

[153] Chapter IV explores this in detail.

[154] Whereby matter, for example, is degraded to the endorsement of a 'flight from the world' and into a sphere of pure spirit, see, for example, Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 61ff.

[155] IC, p. 75.

[156] See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), p. 86.

[157] GaG, p. 125.

3.9.3 Weil and Plato: Contradiction and the Good

As chapter I suggested, both Descartes and Plato have a similar view of the transcendence of the divine. For Plato in any case, scholars have severely debated whether or not he actually conceived of a personal God.[158] First of all, one has to recognize Plato as a philosopher who was profoundly concerned to awaken the human soul to the illusions of the physical world and the truth that resides beyond it, that is, a world that embodies eternal truths and realities – what Plato calls the Forms or Ideas – that are set to remind the soul of what it has forgotten by being in the material world. The realm of the Forms is the divine realm.[159] Plato foresees the material world as a realm based on opinion and conjecture, and where true knowledge is impossible to attain because knowledge has to be certain, and that certainty resides in a world that is immutable and eternal. Nothing in this world satisfies these requirements. For Plato, 'God' resides between this eternal realm and the realm of matter. In the *Timaeus*, 'God' is understood as the 'Maker' who orders and moulds pre-existent matter in such a way that is conforms to the Forms and Ideas of the supreme metaphysical realm.[160] Now since he believes that matter is 'evil', it would appear that there is a chasm between the transcendent Forms, which includes 'God', and physical matter. That is to say, in Plato's thinking there is a gap that clearly distinguishes the eternal realms of Goodness (the realm of the Forms) from the lower, ever-changing realms of becoming.[161] But this gap has a purpose for providing the means by which the soul returns to its natural dwelling place in the divine.

For Plato, if the heavenly realm (of Forms and Ideas) is the divine world, then the task of the soul is to recognize its kinship with this world. To put it another way, when the soul chooses to take flight from this world, it becomes divine: 'flight hence is assimilation to God so far as that is possible' because the soul is naturally divine and seeks to return to the place in which it naturally resides.[162] But first of all what holds the Forms together, and how does Plato conceive of a higher principle in which his idea of

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[158] See, for example, Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian, Mystical Tradition*, p. 195.
[159] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 247C-248E.
[160] Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Henry D. P. Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 28C.
[161] Ibid., 90A-D.
[162] Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 176B.

'God' is solely dependent? Secondly, how does the soul return to an act of contemplation – what Plato calls *theoria* – in order in order for it to return back to its pre-existent nature? The answer to the second question requires initially an answer to the first one in the same way that if one is going to understand the direction the soul will ultimately take, one has to begin to understand the stages that the soul must endure in order to get there in the first place.

Both of these questions are examined by Plato in his most famous political text, the *Republic*. In the format of dialogue, he is ultimately concerned to address the ascent of the soul through what he calls a process of detachment from false reality and an attachment to true reality – a phase he calls *paideia*, i.e. correcting what is untrue about the material world. This correction is aimed at bringing a sense of awakening to the true life of the soul, and a re-orientation of the soul towards that life. Plato goes on to say

> 'that the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with; and that, just as one might have to turn the whole body round in order that the eye should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendour which we have called the Good'.[163]

For Plato, what facilitates then the soul's ascent to divine reality is the realization that it is a spiritual being, and what enables it to reach that condition, he goes on to describe the importance of human purification in order to attain true knowledge. The art of self-purification is outlined in the *Phaedo*: the human being that really wishes to achieve physical detachment has to be willing to purify himself.[164] For Plato, there are two purification processes: a moral and an intellectual dimension of purification. Whilst the moral dimension is concerned with the practice of the moral virtues,[165] the intellectual process of purification is the more important task if the soul is to undergo its ascent to true reality.[166] For Plato, intellectual purification falls under the dialectic, which in turn, enables to human being to appropriately search for the essence of things. Indeed, what he ultimately has in mind in this search is for the individual to attempt to find the highest

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[163] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 518B-C.
[164] Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. H. N. Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 65E – 67B.
[165] Ibid., 69C.
[166] Ibid., 64C – 67A.

principle of all, namely, the Idea of the Good.[167] By embarking on an intellectual pathway of dialectic, the soul can accustom itself to the importance of contemplation, *noesis*. Such contemplation facilitates the soul's journey to true understanding and perception for the Form of the Good is the source all perception and understanding in the intelligible realm. In short, the Good is 'the cause of knowledge and truth', the summit of Plato's metaphysical hierarchy, denoting the supreme metaphysical principle that is far removed from any consideration of a personal being.[168] The Good, in other words, is unknowable, and the soul can only touch it or be united with it.[169] It is the ultimate form of contemplation that one cannot produce or practice in the same way that we can practice dialectic. In short, the Good extends beyond the dialectic; one can only be prepare and be ready for it.[170]

But to reach this level of contemplation, the soul has to make an ascent from a world that Plato characterizes as unreality to a world of true and perfect reality. His allegory of the Cave from the seventh book of the *Republic* is perhaps the most suitable illustration to explain the stages of the soul's return to divine reality.[171] The Cave is an allegorical representation of the soul's journey towards divine reality, and is revealed to the individual by means of our physical bodies and human senses. The Cave represents illusion, a world in which human beings have been accustomed to recognising it as 'true reality'. On the other side, however, it also represents a search for reality. The first stage is an awakening, an illumination that things individuals have identified as real and true is in fact nothing but illusion and deception.

In summation, the allegory describes the journey of a prisoner that consciously moves from seeing shadows and hearing echoes to observing the 'artificial objects' that are responsible for these shadows and echoes.[172] If the prisoner is willing to pursue with

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[167] Ibid., 97C – 99D.
[168] See, for example, T. G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer*? pp. 69ff; M. J. Walsh, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), pp. 22-75; G. Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God* (Dublin: The Columbia Press, 1994), pp. 18-86.
[169] Plato, *Republic*, 490B.
[170] See A.-J. Festugiére, *Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon* (Paris, 1967), p. 191. Cited in Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 12-13.
[171] Plato, *Republic*, 514A – 516C.
[172] For a detailed, mystical interpretation of Plato's 'Cave', see Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, pp. 3-6.

the difficulty and painfulness of this ascent, he will eventually come to the entrance of the cave where the weakness of his eyes will blind him, but with time, the 'prisoner' will become accustomed to this awakened realization so that inevitably he will come to identify the source of his knowledge directly through the Sun itself.[173] The entire movement of the soul through Plato's cave is, as Andrew Louth puts it, 'a long and gradual process of detachment from false reality and attachment to, and growing familiarity with, true reality: that is what Plato sees as the soul's ascent'.[174] What is interesting to note here is how the difficulty of Plato's ascent corresponds to the dialectic involved in the process of intellectual purification. First of all, the dialectic is an exchange of propositions and counter-propositions that aim to bring about a synthesis of the opposing assertions. In other words, the dialectic reflects the contradiction in any given exchange, with one prominent example coming out of the acquisition of knowledge through the relation between the soul and body in Plato's *Phaedo*:

> 'if pure knowledge is impossible while the body is with us, one of two things must follow, either it cannot be acquired at all, or only when we are dead: for then the soul will be by itself apart from the body but not before. And while we live, we shall, I think, be nearest to knowledge when we avoid as far as possible [...] communion with the body, except what is absolutely necessary. [...] Freeing ourselves from the foolishness of the body and being pure, we shall, I think, be with the pure and shall know ourselves all that is pure – and that is, perhaps, the truth'.[175]

The dialectic, in other words, addresses the struggle of the soul's ascent back to God, but Plato is clear to point out that the ultimate contemplation of the Good, beyond his 'God', is the end of dialectic.[176] As mentioned earlier, the Good is something that one has to be in a position of receivership in as much as a willingness to prepare for it, for it cannot transpire in the dialectical exchange.

3.9.4 Weil's Understanding of Contradiction

Briefly, what is interesting is how Weil, like Plato, argues that true knowledge is not only divine, but that every 'thinking' being has the ability to understand, or at least, to reach

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[173] The Sun, for Plato, is an allegorical representation of the Form of the Good. See
[174] See Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, p. 6.
[175] Plato, *Phaedo*, 66E – 67A.
[176] See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 264E – 266B.

the stage of contemplating the Good. According to Weil, Plato's impersonal good is directed towards God – 'God is the sole good'[177] located '[...] outside this world'.[178] It is this conception of the good that establishes her use of contradiction and the dialectic. First of all,

> [the good is] what every soul seeks, the motive of all its actions, whose importance is sensed, but the soul, being at a loss, is unable completely to grasp its essence.[179]

Then,

> the essential contradiction in human life is that man, whose very being consists in an effort towards the good is at the same time subject [...] to a blind force, to a necessity completely indifferent to the good. [...] That is why no human thinking can escape from contradiction [for] it is sometimes a sign of truth. Plato knew this.[180]

For Weil, contradiction then is an opposition between perceptions, beliefs and ideas or 'the predication of terms' that she is intent upon resolving in order to contemplate their truth.[181] In relation to Plato's Good, she draws upon the use of contradiction in order to show that the possibilities of reconciling the division (perceived) between the realms of the natural and supernatural are limited. 'Duality' she says, 'means opposition, contradiction'[182] and 'contradiction is our path leading toward God' because we are not only creatures and creation is a contradiction, but contradiction is 'the

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[177] FLN, p. 349.
[178] Ibid., p. 139.
[179] Plato, *The Republic* VI, 505e. See also IC, 132. For the sake of these discussions I intend to use Weil's translation of these Platonic texts in order to illuminate the metaphysical precepts contained in the foundation of her thought on the human condition and its destiny. Some philosophical translations of *The Republic* use the terms 'mind', 'illuminate' and 'intelligence', but in the case of Weil's French translations of these Greek terms, she uses 'soul' instead of 'mind', 'shine' instead of 'illuminate', and 'spirit' instead of 'intelligence'. Therefore, I am using the English translations of her French translations of these Greek texts. These differences do not significantly undermine the fundamental inspiration of Plato's philosophy on how to relate true knowledge to 'The Good'. However, to locate *specific* references of *The Republic, within* Weil's citations, I will simply refer to Paul Shorey's translation, (Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 1935).
[180] OL, p. 173. Necessity as a force will be discussed in detail in chapter IV, but in the meantime, Weil in short, uses it to elucidate two kinds of necessity for the individual. The kind of necessity referred to here is a crushing force which destroys the individual, whereas, the other, 'divine necessity', is a balanced force in the physical reality which enables the individual to connect with the reality of the supernatural.
[181] See E. O. Springsted, 'Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil', pp. 2-3.
[182] N, p. 76.

discovery of mediation' in which man awakens to God.[183] Plato, therefore, makes a positive use of contradiction in his dialectics for thought in order to awaken thought in the first place. But she is cautious not to identify contradiction as the essence of reality itself, rather it is 'used [...] like a pair of pincers, so that through it direct contact may be made with the transcendent sphere of truth beyond the range of human faculties'.[184] Referring specifically to Plato's Good, Weil explains the importance of contradiction to transcend the intelligence:

> The contact is direct, though made through an intermediary, in the same way as the sense of touch is directly affected by the uneven surface of a table over which you pass, not your hand, but your pencil. The contact is real [...].[185]

To explain the idea that contradiction can transcend intelligence, Weil uses the image of a pencil as a tool of perception that enables the individual to experience the unevenness of the surface of a table.[186] Incidentally, this brings to light a similar image portrayed by Descartes and his idea of a 'blind person's stick', which Weil discusses in her dissertation, *Science et perception*. Like the pencil, the stick is a tool of perception that enables the blind man to feel things directly 'as if it were sensible and formed part of his body'.[187] In the same way, she says, contradiction is understood as a tool of perception that enables human beings to make contact with the supernatural. In other words, contradiction enables the individual to make up the shortcomings of human intelligence that render it incapable of fully grasping the truth of the transcendent realm. Briefly speaking, paradox, for Weil, 'is our path leading towards God'.[188]

Through her studies on Greek thought, Weil's use of the dialectic is a vehicle for perceiving the higher realms. For the Greeks, believing that the fabric of reality is connected through the persistent tension between the natural and supernatural, equilibrium and disequilibrium, define the divinely imposed structure of the world as the harmony and balance between apparently contradictory aspects of reality. In an attempt

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[183] Ibid., pp. 385-6. For remarks on Weil's belief in the absurdity of creation, and its relation to the process of decreation, see FLN, 103, 120-21, 296-97.
[184] OL, p. 173.
[185] Ibid.
[186] FW, p. 78
[187] Ibid., p. 79.
[188] N, p. 386.

to draw out the spiritual life of Pythagorean thought – the 'great mystery of Greek civilization' that embraces the unity between secular life and the supernatural world[189] – Weil cites several extracts that reflect this unity, one of which comes from the Greek philosopher and mathematician, Philolaus: those things 'that are not alike, nor of the same root, nor of the same station, need to be locked together under key by a harmony capable of maintaining them in the world order'.[190] For both Weil and her perception of the Greeks, the beauty of locking these contradictory 'stations' together is to reveal the links, the bridges, not only between contradictories, but more importantly, to establish contact between the natural and supernatural worlds. At the heart of human existence, and therefore, the human condition, is contradiction. She goes on to say that:

> Everything we want contradicts the conditions or the consequences attached to it, every affirmation we put forward involves a contradictory affirmation, all our feelings are mixed up with their opposites. It is because we are a contradiction – being creatures – being God and infinitely other than God.[191]

Although such contradictions pervade all of reality, the task for the human being is not to resolve or eliminate them, 'because in this world man cannot release himself from contradictions, he can only make good use of them'.[192] In addition, the proper use of contradiction is of paramount importance for it is what 'pulls, draws the soul, toward the light'.[193] And this is how Weil aims to read Plato's myth of the 'Cave'. The prisoner, coming out of the cave from the casting shadows of various objects,

> has to continue walking, no matter how painfully and although he is ignorant of where he is going. Once out of the cave, one's pain is even sharper because of the brilliant light, but one is in safety. No further efforts of will are needed; one has only to remain in a state of attention and contemplate something whose dazzle is almost unbearable. [194]

During the soul's transition from the cave to the sun, from darkness to light, the contemplation consists, according to Weil and Plato, of a 'chosen intermediary', that is to

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[189] IC, pp. 151ff.
[190] Ibid., p. 154.
[191] GG, pp. 86-87.
[192] SNL, p. 60.
[193] N, p. 34.
[194] SNL, p. 90.

say, a relation. Once the soul begins to recognize a relation, i.e. 'a point half-way between [...] temporal becoming and the plenitude of being'[195], the 'faculty of thought' emerges and shadows and false representations are not so much perceived as illusory, but rather as a contradiction. This is the test of the real: 'when through clear conception one is brought up against the inconceivable, that is the shock produced by reality'.[196] Reality thus represents essentially contradiction.[197] In summation,

> wherever there is the appearance of contradiction there is a correlation of contraries, that is to say, there is a relation. Whenever the intelligence is brought up against a contradiction, it is obliged to conceive a relation which transforms the contradiction into a correlation, and as a result the soul is drawn upwards.[198]

For the soul to be drawn upwards, contradiction has a deeper use that is familiar to what has been shown already, namely, to transcend a limited viewpoint, which is, says Weil, that the contradiction is a 'means of emerging from a point of view'[199] so that 'their opposition is smoothed out on the level of supernatural love'.[200] Love, she says, is the central link between Plato and Christianity.[201]

Contradiction, in other words, is a valuable heuristic device for 'emerging from the point of view'[202] in order to seek a higher and more complete unity for understanding the world.[203] The issue that I aim to discuss in the next chapter, having now identified Weil's link to Plato, is the manner in which she makes use of contradiction in order to clearly establish a distinction between creation in which divine omnipotence takes on the form of an impersonal, mathematically rigid necessity from which nothing can escape and a supernatural plane of divine grace and freedom, of light and eternity from where all things naturally return and reside.[204] Intellectually speaking, forthcoming discussions will also attempt to illustrate how her commitment to the tension of contradictories is

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[195] Ibid., p. 113.
[196] SE, p. 219.
[197] N, p. 387.
[198] SNL, p. 113.
[199] N, p. 46. See also, D. McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist,* 197; G. A. White, 'Introduction', in *Simone Weil: Interpretation of a Life,* p. 7.
[200] GG, p. 93.
[201] IC, p. 202; Plato, *Timaeus*, 28C.
[202] N, p. 46. See also LP, p. 73, 78, 93.
[203] E. O. Springsted, 'Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil', p. 7.
[204] GG, pp. 94-96. See also, Gerda Blumenthal, 'Simone Weil's Way of the Cross', p. 226.

motivated by a passionate intent to eliminate or resolve them in light of wanting to establish a supernatural reality within the natural world.

In short, Weil's theology, like Plato's philosophy, is an attempt to live a life one can only truly live beyond death; in fact, as Plato once remarked, philosophy is a preparation for death.[205] Her intent to use Platonic thought in which to draw the soul upwards into divine mystery explains why he is considered by her 'as an authentic mystic [...], the father of Occidental mysticism'.[206] But Weil's mystical theology and her use of Plato in this respect plays a rather significant role concerning the relation between God and creation – the idea that the act of creation was not an expansion of the divine, but more of a renunciation or abdication.[207] The universe as an abandoned kingdom explains God's separation and withdrawal from material reality.[208] What clearly contributes to Weil's 'negative theology' is motivated by a much broader attempt to make sense of the fundamental misery and evil of human existence.

In terms of attending to the mystical themes of Weil's writings, one cannot rely on rational or strictly analytical modes of analysis because much of an investigation into mystical experiences and ideas go beyond basic human 'intelligence', and into, a language of contradiction, symbol and mystery.[209] Put another way, the important point to realize is that the mystical orientation of her thoughts as constituted is best represented by what Andrew Louth regards as an apophatic theological tradition, that is to say, a tradition concerned with understanding the divine on the basis that all speech and thought has failed to suffice, and one instead, is reduced to mere silence.[210] This kind of sinerio in mystical thought makes it increasingly difficult for it to be governed by fixed belief systems. Rather, mysticism in this sense is pre-empted and determined by a realm of spirituality, contemplation and attention. Prior to investigating Weil's personal and mystical theology, one, however, has to briefly summarize, from this chapter, the

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[205] Plato, *Phaedo*, 66E.
[206] IC, p. 77.
[207] N, p. 193; WFG, pp. 144-45; IC, p. 183.
[208] N, p. 560; GaG, p. 80; FLN, p. 120.
[209] See, for example, Fritz Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 22-24; Eric O. Springsted, 'Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil', pp. 1-16.
[210] For a detailed discussion on apophatic theology, see Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, pp. 166-68, 173-8.

continuity of Weil's thoughts from a social and political preoccupation to a religious and mystical orientation.

3.10 *Conclusion*

As several investigations have indicated so far, the notion of contradiction permeates throughout most of Weil's written work and life encounters.[211] The rules of her universe – the manifestation of two contradictory forces of light and gravity[212] – have been shown to govern her philosophical explorations into several relations within the social and political system. For example, an investigation into what she understood as the causes of oppression demonstrated, for her, that part of the problem of human slavery resides in a person's difficulty to be mentally active in their daily lives. A relationship, therefore, between the mind and the world is necessary for the individual to think and act, but that the basis of this relation, according to Weil, 'presupposes a preliminary transformation in both production and culture'.[213] By implication then, human beings, paradoxically, are subject to the material conditions of their existence, but equally independent of those conditions through their capacity to think and act freely. Here, the development of human autonomy as a paradigm between the individual and nature is based upon Weil's earlier preservation and synthesis, in philosophical terms, of the materialist and idealist.[214] That is to say, she recognizes a person's root in and connection with nature and, in particular, its own subjection to material reality, but equally, she also recognizes the mind as an instrument which, 'far from passively reflecting the world, exercises itself on the world with the double aim of knowing it and transforming it'. By bringing to light the tension of

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[211] See, for example, J. P. Little, 'Contribution à une étude de l'usage du paradoxe chez Simone Weil', in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, Vol. XI (1988), 105-114; A. Teuber, 'Simone Weil: Equality as Compassion', in *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* 43 (1982-83), 221ff; J. P. Little, 'Simone Weil and the Limits of Language', in J. M. Dunaway & E. O. Springsted (eds.), *The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 44-48. This article initially appeared in French under the title, 'Grandeur et misére du langage chez Simone Weil', in *Simone Weil et Les Langues, Cahier du Groupe de Recherches sur la Philosophie et le langage* 13 (Grenoble: Département de Philosophie, Université P. Mendès-France, 1991), 179-92. See also, E. Jennings, 'A World of Contradictions: A Study of Simone Weil', 349-58; E. O. Springsted, 'Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil', 1-16, or, in J. M. Dunaway & E. O Springsted (eds.), *The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, 13-29.

[212] Ibid., p. 1

[213] See FW, p. 194; TNFR, pp. 70-71.

[214] OL, pp. 28-35.

this contradiction between both aspects, Weil intended to bring the individual into the centre of its own experience where it not only experiences the external forces of nature, but simultaneously exercises thought over nature. Yet an experience of nature failed to include, as the discussion suggested, the difficulties within social relations, and how Weil's paradigm between the individual and nature excludes real individual relations. This is, for example, prevalent with her notion of human liberty from *Oppression and Liberty*, that is, the relation between thought and action. Based upon the direct confrontation between the individual and nature, without the intervention of other human beings, Weil's idea of human liberty fails to adequately account for how the individual might work its personal situation (or inner reality) in relation to outer, communal life, and in spite of whatever the prevailing external circumstances might be.

As the discussion suggested, her notion of freedom struggles to support her epistemic claim concerning the importance of the mind's contact with the exterior world. What this led to was an illustration of several extreme social ideologies from a utopia (in equilibrium) in which each human being would respect, love and care for every other individual, to reflections on contemporary society that were anything but cynical and pessimistic, and ultimately set to maintain the separation of one individual from another in what she defined as a 'division of labour'. In summation, as McFarland argues, Weil 'dedicated herself to searching for answers to fundamental questions about the nature of oppression and the reasons for human exploitation. She attempted to alleviate suffering or share in it, and in the last years of her life, profoundly explored the relationship of the human condition to the realm of the transcendent'.[215]

By addressing the relation between the individual and the collective, and the human and the divine, the discussion explored how each represented Weil's 'dilemma of worldliness' and 'dilemma of worldlessness' respectively. The final sections of this chapter have attempted to address the latter dilemma in terms of the relation between the human and the divine in Weil's writings, in addition to exploring her broader conception of God in relation Descartes and Plato, and more importantly, her growing hostility towards social institutions, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. What these themes have attempted to address is the continued motivation by Weil to resist social elitism,

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[215] FW, p. 1

discussed in relation to the Church, and her on-going hostility towards these institutions that continue to promote divisions within society.

Nevertheless, in an attempt to shine light on the growing issues of evil and human misery, which she encountered in her year of factory work, Weil became more concerned about directing the human soul back to God. By drawing on Plato and Greek thought in order to establish a link between the supernatural and natural world, and then affirming this link through the crucifixion of the Incarnation, Weil's ultimate goal for human beings has been shown to alleviate the burden of human suffering. Part of this alleviation has been outlined in terms of what she establishes as the importance of human freedom and social transformation. Once these two aspects have been established, the individual is then at the stage whereby it can be adequately trained to continue loving in the midst of human misery. The discussion addressed Weil's use of Plato in terms of the nature of contradiction, and Weil's particular attempt in the discussion to reconcile the extreme realities between the human and the divine.[216] This, which is explored fully in the next chapter, is the basis of Weil's mystical theology, her journey with Plato and Christianity, and ultimately, her quest to bring the human being into contact with the divine. The basis of human liberty, and therefore, mental creativity, is necessary for the individual to make contact with, and return to, the essence of God. But what takes place in the aftermath of this newly found autonomy is the idea, according to Weil, that the individual gives it all up in order to return to God. In other words, a person is forced to annihilate itself in what becomes a process of 'decreation', divine self-emptying, for spiritual regeneration.[217]

One would appear to believe that through her intent to show how Plato and the Greeks 'invented the idea of mediation', she would personally and intellectually establish

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[216] On the issue of justice, for example, Weil goes so far as to suggest, having upon Platonic reflection, that justice is 'a supernatural friendship that results from harmony. Harmony is the unity of contraries', IC, p. 174; and that such a reconciliation of contraries occurs only in love.[216] Only in this love can the collective be transformed. See W. Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. I, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 99-114. See also, Vol. II, pp. 65ff; Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, pp. 13-14.

[217] FLN, pp. 290-1. Weil's idea of 'decreation', which I allude to in chapter I, is Weil's description of the spiritual pathway back to God in which the individual recognizes that it is ultimately nothing, that is, non-being. In which case, this notion illustrates the dual aspects of a human being: the 'natural', created aspect and the supernatural, 'uncreated' aspect which resides with God. This relation in the decreative process enables the person to recognize the real aspect, that is, 'to make something created pass into the uncreated'. I will refer to Weil's concept of decreation and its implications through several on-going discussions. For further details however, see GG, pp. 28-34; N, pp. 337-40.

some degree of ease by which the supernatural could be drawn into the material world. But, as this chapter has attempted to argue, bringing about some relation between the supernatural and the natural worlds has proven to be a far more difficult task for Weil. With the growing suggestion that, on an intellectual level, she is determined to establish the connection of both worlds, but on a personal level and in terms of the interrelation of her thoughts and experiences, her hostility towards the bourgeois society is keeping these intellectual ideas within the domain of ideas, then it appears increasingly unlikely that Weil is able to bring these worlds into a cooperative relationship with one another that works for the good of all human beings. For what has been argued in this chapter is that her deepening reservations against the polis, on a social, political and religious level, contribute to the unlike hood of their ever being a clear pathway for the supernatural to find its place in material reality. In short, however, this tension, hidden behind the veil of her desire to relate the human and the divine, draws the discussion into a far more elusive inquiry, in chapter IV, that asks whether Weil's social concerns severely impacted upon what many commentaries describe as the negative side of her use of Plato both from a social as well as theological point of view.[218]

Ultimately though, Weil wants to prepare the human being existentially and spiritually for her transcendent reality, which takes the inquiry beyond the scope of assessment in this chapter, and into an investigation on the dimension of her religious thought and spiritual discourses in the next chapter.[219] The aim of the next chapter then is to explore the 'negative side' of Weil's theology by attempting to illustrate how the individual makes contact with the other side. This will involve an examination of this contact and its implications through an assessment of her personal theology and the salvation of the human soul. In particular, looking at her affiliation with Gnostic thought may, in turn, bring forward ways in which neo-gnosticism will illuminate some of Weil's conflicts with the material world.

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[218] See, for example, Michael Narcy, 'The Limits and Significance of Simone Weil's Platonism', in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, pp. 23-42.

[219] By spiritual discourses, Weil refers, for example, to efforts of detachment, attention and the will that aim to breakdown down the ego and enable the supernatural aspect of the soul to make contact with God. This act, which Weil calls 'decreation', will be assessed in light of her social and political preoccupations in the next chapter. For a good discussion of aspects of Weil's mystical insight, see Miklos Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, trans. Joan Dargan, Chap. 1.

Chapter IV: Experiencing the 'Void'

> Love is not consolation, it is light...I have to Love to be nothing. How horrible it would be if I were something. I have to love my nothingness, love to be nothingness; to love with that part of the soul which lies on the other side of the curtain, for the part of the soul which is perceptible to consciousness is unable to love nothingness...If it thinks it does love nothingness, what it really loves is something different.[1]

4.1 *Introduction*

Broadly speaking, this chapter aims to investigate Weil's mystical theology prior to and after her conversion experiences between 1937 and 1938. But before outlining specific themes that attempt to examine the manner in which she attempts to guide the human being back to God, one ought to review several key contentions concerning her assessment of the human condition so that the direction in which this chapter aims to proceed is clearly understood. With an underlying concern that Weil is unable to interrelate the supernatural with the natural world, the last areas of assessment in this chapter attempt to examine whether her religious insights are able to provide an alternative perspective to understanding this problem. If so, how might one digest and interpret her writings to reflect her most innate spiritual instinct, which is to bring the impoverished human being to the foot of Plato's cave where it would be illuminated and transformed by the light of the Sun? In the meantime, however, what are the key issues concerning Simone Weil's intellectual preoccupations?

So far, *Science et perception* from chapter II and *Oppression and Liberty* from the previous chapter have been concerned to illustrate the epistemic transformation of thought into action in Weil's earlier philosophical writings. Examining these texts have helped to explain the underlying separation between thought and action in her doctrine of thought and concept of freedom respectively. Indeed, what this assessment primarily uncovered was the separation and tension between her inner, mystical world and an external world that she was so desperate to heal and bring into balance. For example, the

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[1] N, p. 258, 262

difficulty of her notion, and the corresponding consequences, of humiliation and human freedom in *Oppression and Liberty* elucidate the growing gulf in her thinking between the importance given to individual existence and the reality that such an existence is confronted with in relation to outer, social and political circumstances. As that discussion argued, Winch had a real point to make against Weil's inability to clarify the source and nature of her theme of humiliation, particularly within her social and political forums. More evidently, however, this issue to do with humiliation reflects a deeper problem with her notion of freedom, namely, how her approach to the superiority of thought gradually alienated the individual from real life.

In spite of this problem with regards to her philosophy on social and political relations, the previous chapter had also identified how Weil valued the participation in and experience of manual labour.[2] Her social concerns were an attempt to refine the social system that would aim to establish the experience of manual work as a gateway to mystical life. In other words, her concerns towards the juxtaposition of the political and religious life would attempt to establish the possibility of human freedom by means of intelligent thought, and specifically, the incarnation of thought into action in which the mind would make contact with the external world. But in order for Weil to bring some consistency to the nature of her epistemological inquiries, she would have to go out and encounter in the most direct way what it must be like to be a manual worker. And indeed, her experiences of factory work showed how social institutions promoted a division of labour by dehumanizing the unskilled worker to a mere machine whose sole purpose is to meet the demands of high production and high profit. The worker, consequently, fails to live with any degree of dignity and self-worth as a human being.[3] Subjecting herself to the brutal force and weight of factory work not only re-enforced Weil's impetuous contempt for social institutions, but resorted to her overwhelming belief that she had become a slave.[4]

This was a remarkable deviation from the tone of her social theory that was determined to work to transform society in such a way that it would be able to establish human liberty. Broadly speaking then, this chapter aims to assess this transformation in

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[2] OL, p. 31.
[3] Ibid., p. 103. See David McLellan, *Simone Weil*, pp. 88-9.
[4] FW, pp. 159ff; WFG, p. 33. See also, Rush Rees, *A Sketch for a Portrait*, pp. 48-61.

Weil's thinking from the individual that is directed initially towards human autonomy, but in the aftermath of her factory experiences, is branded with the status of servitude, and after the event of her conversion experiences, the slave travels the path of self-effacement.[5] Precisely, these three stages represent Weil's theological enterprise to bring the human being back to God, which, in metaphysical terms, represent various experiences of contradiction that draw the individual towards and into an experience of the void.[6] The void, as mentioned earlier, is a representation of nothingness in which the human soul, naked, is able to make contact with the divine. Where the previous chapter outlined and examined the credibility of human liberty under the 'umbrella' of Weil's 'dilemma of worldliness', this chapter explores slavery, religious conversion, detachment and death as several key religious elements that encompass Weil's mystical theology and 'dilemma of worldlessness'.[7]

Inevitably, the correlation between Weil and Plato from chapter III will continue to develop towards elucidating these transitional phases in her personal and intellectual vocation in and with the world. With reference to their respective uses of contradiction and her adaptation of Plato's myth of the Cave to draw the human soul into divine awareness, the intention here is to assess the credibility of Weil's interpretation in terms of how the ordinary human being and its new-found ability to think intelligently proceeds to new spiritual and philosophical heights that would enable it to detach from the world. Inevitably, her concern is for the thinking worker to recognize how appropriate thought and work are essential to know oneself and the world. A person who ultimately detaches her or himself from the world renounces it with their soul and mind so that a void is set in place. As Weil puts it, the divider here is the individual situated 'behind [a] curtain' with its 'being' located 'on the supernatural side. [...] The curtain is human misery'.[8] In which case, 'there is no entry into the transcendent until the human faculties – intelligence, will, human love – have come up against their limit'.[9] Thus, detached thought 'has as its object a way of living, a better life, not elsewhere but in this world and immediately'.[10] But the

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[5] For a thorough assessment of these key stages, see Miklos Vetö, *The Metaphysics of Simone Weil,* pp. 5ff.
[6] FLN, pp. 159-60.
[7] For further discussion of Weil's 'dilemma of worldlessness', see BHD, pp. 108-145.
[8] GG, pp. 33-4.
[9] FLN, p. 335.
[10] P, p. 405.

issue of how this thought aims to practically facilitate this better life and way of living leads to another matter altogether, a matter that brings to light Weil's interest and enthusiasm for Gnostic thought.[11]

Where several commentaries have clearly wanted to keep her theology distanced from this ancient phenomenon,[12] there are remarkable similarities between their ideas not least that they both clearly display deep reservations toward social institutions, not to mention the created order. In addition, they both hold religious views concerning the role and status of the Church, the Incarnation, and the salvation of the human soul that, for Orthodox Christian theology, would clearly be deemed heretical. The details of these heresies will be outlined later on. Nevertheless, the most striking reason for drawing a comparison between Weil and Gnosticism is, first of all, the charge in this thesis that aspects of her thought concerning the relation between the human and the divine appear dualistic, and Gnostic thought has been heretically condemned for its dualistic metaphysics on creation. In other words, one element of their respective belief systems that illustrate their affinity is based upon dualistic thought. The main reason, however, of drawing a comparison between them is to show how a contemporary understanding of Gnostic thought can illuminate some of the key issues within the structure and context of Weil's thoughts. In other words, a neo-gnostic conception of the human and divine relation will attempt to address its underlying non-dualistic context in order to bring the individual into an awareness of its divinity and union with the divine.

But before the discussion reaches this stage, the investigation needs to begin to explore the first two stages of Weil's metaphysical enterprise to direct the human being back to God. That is to say, how her growing reservations against the social order contributed to her status of servitude and the impact of her conversion experiences towards what some commentaries have called Weil's 'negative theology', i.e. whereby detached thought becomes part of a larger process of self-elimination. With a continued emphasis on her use of Plato in the next section, the discussion moves into an exploration

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[11] As I mentioned in Chapter I and II respectively, Weil's interest in Gnostic thought is not particularly surprising, particularly as she identified with the Gnostics on their belief in the illusions of the social order, the importance of detachment and self-purification. Most of all, her identification with the supernatural aspect of the soul, the divine spark in Gnostic terms, is an attempt to address some degree of affinity between human beings and the divine. See FLN, p. 103.

[12] See, for example, David McLellan, *Simone Weil*, pp. 195ff; Dorothy McFarland, *Simone Weil*, p. 118.

of how her fall into slavery was governed by her continual hostility towards the collective.

4.2 *The Value of Human Suffering*

In order to understand the nature of Weil's personal theology, one has to understand why she was so explicitly motivated, from a religious viewpoint, to enable the workers to participate in their work as free and creative subjects? Also, from the same perspective, why was she so insistent upon social transformation, thereby intent upon making changes to material conditions within society? Towards the end of her life, Weil argued in one of her well-known essays, 'The Love of God and Affliction',[13] that to transform the context of a human being's environment, the mind has to recognize suffering as part of the order of creation, and recognize the revelation of divine love within it. If both these material conditions and the mental faculties of the individual are transformed, then the forces of necessity[14] and suffering can become what she calls an 'apprenticeship': 'The body plays a part in all apprenticeships. On the plane of physical sensibility, suffering alone gives us contact with that necessity which constitutes the order of the world [...]'.[15] In other words, the combination of social transformation and the promotion of human liberty are an attempt by Weil to generate a degree of spiritual training for the individual in order for it to experience the love within necessity and suffering.[16] In a nutshell, this amounts to bringing the human and the divine into relation with one another.

But as the previous chapter suggested, her view of contemporary society, and, in the aftermath of her essays on oppression and liberty, her direct contact with human exploitation through her year of factory work, failed to provide the optimism in which she had hoped the social system might be able to meet the needs of the human soul. Weil's direct contact with human exploitation through this year proceeded to divide her intellectual and personal vocation with the world in the sense that social transformation

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[13] SNL, pp. 170-98.
[14] Necessity, from chapter III, is understood as a network of ordered relationships that are instrumental in her religious as well as her political thoughts; see, for example, IC, pp. 180-5; Dorothy McFarland, *Simone Weil*, pp. 130-1; 157-8.
[15] WFG, pp. 131-32.
[16] On spiritual training, see TNFR , p. 67, 85. On loving necessity and suffering, see ibid., p. 178.

was becoming increasingly problematic, which, in turn, meant that the conditions for her 'apprenticeship' would not promote the spiritual and religious implications of human liberty. But in view of the fact that Weil's idea of human freedom has, in the first place, no appropriate basis in which human beings can relate to and negotiate with one another, and given the scenario that the polis was unlikely to transform itself to Weil's social expectations, then the basis of drawing the supernatural into the material world appears to be an unlikely event even though, intellectually speaking, her intention to bring the human and the divine into relation with one another is perfectly clear. But this alludes to the point that the relation between the human and the divine is an intellectual rather than a physical or practical relation. What leads to this divide, on the one hand, is how Weil's concern for the transformation of the polis is overshadowed by her hostility towards the social system[17], and, on the other, with her factory experiences and post-factory encounters that continued to aggravate her attitude to the social system, and her experience of the inevitability of human affliction as experienced by the 'anonymous mass' of humanity.

In terms of understanding human suffering, Weil's discourse on 'affliction', (*Malheur*), is an attempt to identify a kind of suffering distinct from all other sufferings; a form of pain that inspires horror and repulsion rather than pity or sympathy. So devastating is this experience that it amounts to an absence of God and a kind of death to the soul. On the presupposition that the mind can be cultivated through the possibility of social transformation, the endurance of an experience such as affliction is the highest destiny possible for any human being, that is, to continue to love even though one is totally forsaken and nailed to a cross.[18] This theme of bringing divine love in human suffering, Weil identifies with the Incarnation,[19] but the point of surfacing it is to clearly illustrate the personal transformation that her factory experiences would have towards her sense of self, and the emphasis that would bring in the development of her mystical theology. Secondly, the outcome of these experiences led to a sense of servitude that was burnt into her soul, so much so that towards the end of her life, Weil could not help but

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[17] I will attempt to discuss this hostility in relation to her use of Plato in due course.
[18] WFG, p. 64.
[19] See, for example, Eric O. Springsted, *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1986).

believe that there must be some mistake if ever there was any human being whoever he may be and in whatever circumstances, could speak without brutality.[20]

Reflecting upon these ideas in her 'Spiritual Autobiography', Weil concluded that her factory year left her with the 'mark of a slave' and that she would regard herself forever as a slave'.[21] With this branding, which is explored in due course in relation to her conversion experiences, the final phase of her life, i.e. her mystical life, was not so much about her 'dilemma of worldliness', but about her 'dilemma of worldlessness' and the choice she felt compelled to make between her unconditional service to human suffering and equally her desire to maintain the purity of her supernatural world beyond material reality. In other words, the tension, which she attempted to resolve between the individual and the collective, becomes the tension, which again (as I briefly demonstrated in relation to Plato in the previous chapter) she attempts to resolve but now between the human and the divine. It was through the latter that her religious thinking emerged as an unwavering commitment to make sense of the fundamental misery and evil of human existence. But this overriding determination, indeed, her attempt to work with and resolve the difficulties of contradiction, is governed by her clear hostility towards social institutions and bourgeois relations. Weil's reserve against the social order is a serious factor towards the nature of her own personal experiences and sense of self,[22] and in many ways as this chapter argues, contributes to the manner in which she uses contradiction to explore the relation between the human and the divine, and specifically, how she directs the human soul back to God through the framework of her own personal theology. Consequently, the investigation now aims to illustrate how Weil's deep rooted conflict towards the state contributed heavily to her use of Plato, and more importantly, illustrated the transformation in her thinking from human autonomy to decreation, i.e. self-annihilation.

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[20] Ibid., p. 67.
[21] WFG, p. 63.
[22] Taking a leave of absence from teaching in 1934, for example, Weil signed up as an unskilled labourer in several French factories just outside the Parisian capital from December 1934 until August 1935. This period of intense physical work changed forever her intellectual preoccupations with the world as well as with the human soul, but the transformation of her entire being was not only motivated by what she witnessed, but more of what she experienced personally. Her *Journal d'usine* is a day-to-day account of her factory experiences, which, generally speaking, detail her personal pains, frustrations and the rare encounters of joy experienced in industrial work. See SL, pp. 1ff.

4.3 *Slavery and the 'Great Beast' of Plato*

May Dietz once argued on Weil that the overriding matter that manifests in the extreme, paradoxical tension between a forceful mind and a fragile personality is her ultimate sense of revulsion for "collectivities",[23] that is to say, what she regarded as the Great Beast – nationalism, statism, expansionism, warfare, fascism, totalitarianism. Previous discussions have attempted to identify this hostility. One of several on-going themes that surfaced throughout the previous chapters is her deep reservations toward social institutions. What is interesting to point out, and this is something that is discussed in the early sections of Chapter II, is the broader contrast between Weil commentaries that have divided in many respects this transformation in her writings from 'early political' to 'late spiritual'.[24] What is quite significant about this division, however, is that it parallels remarkably with the decisive shift in her intellectual tone between 1934 and after 1938. In spite of her intellectual concerns to bridge the supernatural with the natural world, and from what appears as Weil's unswerving commitment toward 'redemptive suffering', i.e. the belief that through suffering a human being comes to know the love of God,[25] the basis of this need to interrelate God and creation in the first place is governed by an innate hostility to 'society' and to the 'social order' in general. In her notebooks, for example, Weil argues that 'the social order is irreducibly that of the prince of this world. Our only duty with regard to the social is to try to limit to evil of it'.[26] But she even goes to far as to decisively point out that 'man is a social animal and the social element represents evil. [...] The world is uninhabitable. This is why we have to flee to the next. But the door is shut. What a lot of knocking is required before it opens! [...] To be able to enter in [...] one has to cease to be a social being'.[27]

This rather pessimistic view of society, which earlier investigations have shown how this decisively impacts upon her own theoretical analysis of the social system, is further bolstered by Weil's adaptation of Plato's conception of the 'Great Beast'. The Great Beast of Plato occurs in the sixth book of the *Republic*. To adore it, as the Catholic

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[23] BHD, p. 14.
[24] See, for example, BHD, pp. 106ff.
[25] WFG, pp. 60ff.
[26] GG, p. 145.
[27] N, p. 466.

philosopher, Gustav Thibon once remarked, 'is to think and act in conformity with the prejudices and reactions of the multitude to the detriment of all personal search for truth and goodness'.[28] The Great Beast then, as Weil puts it, is the object of idolatry which chains human beings to the earth; it cannot be the 'object of supernatural love. It has no soul'.[29] What is interesting to point out here is the continuity of what Weil regards as the tension between the individual and the state. Earlier discussions pointed out how, for Weil, the causes of oppression from within the social system failed to promote human liberty, i.e. thought itself and the activity of thought have become separate in social relations. Her later development of Plato's 'Great Beast' is an attempt to resolve this problem. Initially, though, she continues to explain how society, represented as a project of individual relationships, has projected power, thought and authority away from the individual and placed them not in a fictional cooperative called 'society', but in individuals as authorities (the power of institutions) that then contrive various coercive social structures in which to define, for example, God, religion and the norms of a social system.[30] The power, says Weil, is the social element whereby agreement between several individuals brings with it a feeling of reality, which in turn, brings a sense of duty and a state of conformity for others that have inevitably renounced their values to the collective. Individual renunciation is based on ignorance and fear, fear that without society, human beings will inevitably collapse into criminal and evil activity.

In this way, the social and collective is recognized as a supernatural entity that transcends individuals, which explains indirectly, why human beings have probably never seriously reflected on these issues at all. The weight then of humanity is a heavy and

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[28] See Plato, *Republic*, 493A-C; MILES, p.121.
[29] Ibid., pp. 121-26.
[30] The kind of thought that supports the flourishing of a society over and above the human being was prominent in the foundations of functionalism in early 20th century Anthropological studies. For example, the renowned British Anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown, focused his attentions on the origin and nature of social structures, suggesting that a society is a system of relationships that maintains itself through on-going feedback, while institutions are orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system. Supporting this network of institutional relations was vital to the survival of any society, and this is something that Weil does not necessarily consider. On the other hand, functionalism has been criticized for celebrating the status quo, and failing to address the importance of conflict and change as essential features of social life. Interestingly, the total opposite can be said of Weil, i.e. her failure to address the importance of conflict in social relations is essential to the growth and development of a society. For details, see Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Finn Servet Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), pp. 50ff.

ponderous gravity, a force to which most individuals remain oblivious.[31] So long as one is entirely subservient to these social structures, the contrived dichotomy of good and evil will trap individuals in fear. In order to resolve this dilemma, as Weil sees it, the individual has to change the perception in which it views the nature of society. For her, the remedy brings us back to her intention to resurrect the idea of relationship for relationship breaks its way out of the social. Society is the cave. The way out is solitude.[32] Put another way, so long as the individual substitute society's view of reality for their own discoveries of reality – so that the relationship to oneself, others, nature and the universe is direct, immediate, intuitive and accountable – the individual will remain oppressed and without liberation. Yet, on the other hand, she is quite emphatic through her adaption of Plato's 'Great Beast' to Christianity, that both are in agreement that the human being 'cannot escape being wholly enslaved to the beast, even down to the innermost recesses of his soul, except insofar as he is freed by the supernatural operation of grace'.[33] And this brings the discussion to the point at which Weil makes the transition from the dilemma in this world to the resolution of it in relation to the supernatural world. In order to escape this enslavement one must turn to the 'door' that is tightly shut, that is to say, one must 'feed on a good which, being situated outside of this world, is not subject to any social influence whatsoever'.[34]

As the investigation attempted to suggest in the last remaining sections of Chapter III, the gift of Plato then is that he offers the key to a spiritual transcendence that is situated outside of this world. What this implies, as Weil says, is that the temporal reality is not only a bridge,[35] but that Plato's thinking brings forward the realization that the divine alone escapes the force of gravity in this world, and the only way in which this realization is possible is through the soul's contemplation of the Good, which is outlined in her interpretation of Plato's allegory of the Cave. To then escape from the errors of the Great Beast, the human soul must choose, says Weil, to travel beyond space and beyond this world.[36] In several essays on, for example, Plato's *Symposium, Republic and*

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[31] GG, pp. 30ff
[32] Ibid., p. 145.
[33] MILES, p. 55.
[34] OL, p. 157.
[35] GG, p. 134. See also, BHD, p. 108.
[36] IC, p. 134.

Timaeus, the truth of Platonic doctrine is understood as vindications of the contemplative spirit, and Plato himself as the paradigmatic example of a soul directed toward God.[37] But to read his thought outside of the context in which Plato constructed his dialogues is pretty much a continuation of Weil's problem of locating human liberty outside of real social relations. Following on from several commentaries in Chapter III, Weil's failure to read Plato in a more direct political and social context is a further indication of her move away from the 'social order' into a more extreme interpretation of Plato that is not rooted in this world, in the political, but rather in the spiritual, transcendent world.[38]

Plato of the *Republic*, who wrestles with social relations, i.e. the relation, for example, between the soul and the collective, and the harmony of the social order does not feature at all in her social analyses.[39] One key example of her spiritual interpretation of Plato comes to light in her essay, 'Some Thoughts on the Love of God'.[40] Here, she pursues her interpretation of Plato's roots in the heavenly realms that disposes in our own lives the illusions of power and authority of the earth, and rather, attaches our reality to the heavens. In an attempt then to turn an individual's sense of liberty in this world to the soul's growing of heavenly roots in relation to the outside world, Weil is very clear what the human being needs to do: 'The city gives us the feeling of being at home. We must take the feeling of being at home into exile. We must be rooted in the absence of a place'.[41] As the investigation aims to demonstrate, Weil's sense of rootedness 'in the absence of a place' corresponds most powerfully to the development of her personal theology that is driven by a desire for selflessness, detachment in the form of stripping away of the 'I', and death. More importantly, what has become increasingly clear is how the journey from individual liberty which attempts to promote the 'I' becomes part of a more sinister determination to annihilate the 'I' and move into a space of non-being within ourselves and within the world.

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[37] BHD, p. 109.
[38] Weil reads Plato's understanding of the soul as that 'part which lifts us from earth towards our celestial affinity [...]. For it is to the heavens [...] that the divine part attaches the [...] root of us'. See Plato, *Timaeus*, 90A-B.
[39] See, for example, R. E. Allen, 'Participation and Predication in Plato's Middle Dialogues', in *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960), 147-164; Paul Shorey, *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
[40] SNL, pp. 148-152.
[41] GG, p. 34.

What is interesting to mention briefly is how commentaries that have attempted to develop Weil's political and spiritual phase, have indirectly, perpetuated the problem of how she, in her later writings, fixes her attention upon the heavens alone and never again looks back toward the city.[42] But in spite of what appears, on the one hand, as a clear dualistic metaphysics in terms of how the material world is clearly separate from the non-material world and indeed her increasingly neo-Platonic preoccupation with the divine, Weil continues to maintain a concern for the individual and the political.[43] What this does imply, therefore, is the growing difficulty of the age in which she lived, that is to say, her feelings of torment over human suffering in the world, and yet, the pull that she experiences with her transcendent reality.

It is the tension then between the human and the divine, or more appropriately, in the choice between the human and the divine, that ultimately, begs the question of whether Weil was ever able to find a sense of equanimity between both worlds. It is this assessment of self-equanimity in her own thinking and living that brings to light whether she ever managed to recognize the supernatural within the natural. As the investigation inquires into her theology of self-effacement, the issue is about whether she consistently keeps the human and the divine separate, thereby counseling a withdrawal from the world, or whether she works again with the possibility of social transformation in order to consider if, or indeed whether, the human being, in relation to the supernatural, is able to engage in physical life. This ambivalence in Weil's thinking is what I now aim to examine, and more importantly, explore in relation to her conversion experiences, personal theology, and the closer affinities between her theological outlook and neo-Gnosticism, rather than what has been characterized as her explicit and exclusive affiliation with Christian theology.[44]

4.4 *The Bridge between the Social and the Mystical in Weil*

What constitutes a source of Weil's theological views of withdrawal, and indeed, what precipitated in the course of her own conversion experiences, rest upon her long-term

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[42] BHD, p. 111.
[43] Ibid.
[44] See, for example, Dorothy Tuck McFarland, *Simone Weil,* p. 115; David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, p. 220.

reservations against the social system and her longing for supernatural unity. Initially, what enables her to establish a link between the social and political order and the metaphysical order is recognized in terms of their being no 'protection of the person against collectivity without a disposition of public life relating it to a higher good which is impersonal and unrelated to any political form'.[45] The importance of establishing a relation between collectivity and a 'higher good' originates with her conviction that sacredness does not exist in a 'human personality' but as an inner spark of perfect goodness.[46] As suggested earlier, without the fruition of this sacred aspect of the individual, Plato's conception of society, the social animal – the great beast – is an obstacle between man and God. To strive from necessity and not for some good – driven not drawn – in order to maintain our existence just as it is – places the individual in a continual stream of slavery.[47]

As the discussion has suggested already, forms of collectivity – 'big industry', 'bureaucratic organization' and 'the development of the power of the State' – subordinate the slave to value judgments that are based on 'a purely external criterion', that is to say, 'entrusted to material objects instead of to the mind'.[48] In other words, the collective is a 'sign of existential helplessness and loss of control – human beings as individuals can no longer even grasp the conditions of their existence, [...]'.[49] Weil experienced the loss of her existence, her mind, her entire being during her years as a slave to merciless bureaucrats in factory work.[50] What this meant for her was that modern life, as such, had been 'transported in an altogether different order of magnitude', individuals that are bodies without minds, being reduced to a passive role for the purpose of industrial progress and mass production.[51] Indeed the individual, against its wishes, is dispossessed in 'favour of the collectivity'.[52] In short, the 'collectivity threatens freedom',[53] and as the great beast, it makes 'it possible to impose by force official doctrines entirely devoid of

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[45] SE, p. 34. See also, EDL, p. 44.
[46] Ibid., pp. 9-13.
[47] GG, p. 159.
[48] OL, pp. 110-15.
[49] BHD, p. 51.
[50] CO, pp. 20-23.
[51] OL, p. 110.
[52] Ibid., p. 111.
[53] BHD, p. 56.

meaning'.[54] It is this dynamic of the collective, according to Weil, which leaves a person without a root for support of itself. In other words, 'it is no good', as she says, 'expecting help to come from men; and even were it otherwise, men would none the less be vanquished in advance by the natural power of things'.[55]

What this alludes to is Weil's desperate hope to salvage the slaves from collectivity in spite of her growing theological withdrawal from the material world. But this conviction goes some way to exposing Weil's own confirmation of servitude, which she came to recognize during and after her factory experiences. In terms of her post-factory experiences, several significant 'moments', beginning in 1936, but of particular importance in 1937, illustrate how her spiritual journey intensified into a series of conversion experiences that not only included intense physical pain for her, but deepened her metaphysical preoccupation with suffering:

> [...] In a wretched condition physically, I entered the Portuguese village, which, alas, was very wretched too, on the very day of its patronal festival. I was alone...the wives of the fisherman were going in procession to make a tour of all the ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rendering sadness...there the conviction was suddenly born in me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.[56]

In Weil's second of three encounters with Catholicism, which were of profound meaning for her, something beyond her strength at the little twelfth-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, compelled her for the first time to fall to her knees in prayer. This 'spiritual moment' became the preface of Weil's most intense and profound encounter with Christianity, where Christ took 'possession of her' forever:

> In 1938 I spent ten days at Solesmes, from Palm Sunday to Easter Tuesday, following all the liturgical services. I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped in a corner, and to

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[54] OL, p. 119.
[55] Ibid.
[56] WFG, pp. 33-34. At the end of 1936 Weil left Spain 'in a wretched condition physically' (Weil's Father on December 15th, writes on the certificate that accompanied her request for leave from the school year, that 'she is not yet cured of her anemia and still suffers from violent headaches and excessive general fatigue'), and made her way to Portugal at the request of her parents. On arrival, she traveled alone to a little fishing village on the festival day of the patron saint, where the combination of her physical condition and state of mind established an association between suffering and Christianity. See P, p. 283.

> find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.[57]

Finding a reference point in the heart of Christ reassured Weil of the authenticity and value of human suffering in Christianity, which gave her further support in her own physical suffering. This spiritual moment 'opened her eyes and ears' to the junction between the natural and supernatural, so that her 'coincidental' meeting with an English Catholic and his introduction to Herbert's metaphysical poem, 'Love', propelled her further into the mystery of the supernatural realm in which Christ was experienced. Within this dimension, Weil was able to give 'attention' to the agony of her headaches, and in Christ's possession of her, reveal her radical distrust of the sensibility of the body.[58] 'In this sudden possession', Weil adds, 'neither my senses nor my imagination had any part', and with this realization comes the consolation of love in the midst of her suffering: 'I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face'.[59] The consolidation of love and suffering in her provided a deep sense of belonging, a 'falling into the arms' of Christ that placed her soul in the supernatural.[60] Her vision of Incarnation intensified the junction between the 'two worlds' in her, so that everything 'physically' became infused with a spiritual identity.[61]

It was in this fusion that she discovered in Christianity, older religious and philosophical traditions – in Plato, in the myths of Greek thought, and in Eastern Buddhist and Hindu traditions. More importantly, however, her conversion experiences meant that her theology developed an unwavering determination to come to terms with the fundamental misery and evil of human existence. But this determination has been

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[57] WFG, p. 34.
[58] Ibid., p. 32.
[59] Ibid., pp. 35-36.
[60] Ibid., p. 36.
[61] After 'falling into the arms of Christ', Weil begins to feel 'that Plato was a mystic, that all the Iliad is bathed in Christian light, and that Dionysus and Osiris are in a certain sense Christ himself'. This universal love in Christ becomes the route of her salvation and the 'one form' she connects to all particularities of the physical world, including her spiritual insight into the unity of Christ in other religions particularly the *Bhagavad-Gita.* See ibid.

primarily concerned to address the nature of the Great Beast in terms of the wider social implications upon the reality of the human being. What now begins to emerge in terms of Weil's conversion experiences is how the individual has to respond in relation to itself and in relation to its environment in order to make contact with the world beyond. Focusing on the personal dimensions of Weil's Mystical Theology becomes a crucial feature for determining whether she enables the human and the divine to make contact, and indeed, if the individual through this contact is able to transform thought into action. What is clear so far is the manner in which, for example, the Great Beast compels the human being to physical attachment and idolatry. For her, both of these aspects diminish a person's awareness of who they are in relation to God. In this case, Weil's mystical theology is an attempt to bring the human being face to face with itself and its relationship with the divine consciousness. What restores this awareness, though, is based on both individual 'attention' to the world beyond, and more importantly, an orientation of the 'self' that accompanies this 'attention' towards the divine.

In her *Notebooks*, for example, which were composed towards the end of her life, the nature of attention is something rather different to how a person would engage with the world and with divine reality. Rather than search or attach one's love to the material world, but instead, remain without attachment – to be detached or what Weil calls to be in spiritual motionlessness – brings forward the realization that 'to search is to impede rather than to facilitate God's operation' in the world.[62] In that case, 'idolatry is due to the fact that, while athirst for absolute good, one is not in possession of 'supernatural attention'; and one has not the patience to let it grow', which is, let it grow towards God.[63] What 'attention' provides is the ability for a person to defy the pull of attachment towards material reality, and instead, be prepared to fix one's soul upon 'the beyond'.[64] By fixing one's gaze on something pure and in that sense 'waiting for God' enables a person to display an appropriate attitude towards receiving divine reality. Consequently, her response is to argue that detachment is not only philosophical reflection that presupposes a transformation of the mind, but also a changed orientation of the entire

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[62] N, p. 505.
[63] Ibid. See also, WFG, pp. 106ff.
[64] Ibid., p. 527.

soul.[65] This orientation leads to a renouncement of all possible goals without exception.[66] Weil is very well aware, though, of how the mind 'is essentially and forever, in what ever way it is disposed, a tension toward value'.[67] To overcome it detachment requires effort and work, and the effort and work that was earlier concerned with labour, now becomes in Weil's religious writings, an effort that concerns an attitude towards the 'self', and how the individual's focus on the self facilitates this attention towards God.

With her growing hostility towards social relations, her use of Plato's 'Great Beast' in which to address the division of labour, and the concept of attention as a crucial part of her theology, Weil is inclined to direct the soul away from the world and into the heart of God through a process she calls self-renunciation or a renunciation of the self. What exactly does the renunciation of the self entail? In a collection of extracts from *Gravity and Grace,* she argues that

> 'renunciation demands that we should pass through anguish equivalent to that which would be caused in reality by the loss of all loved beings and all possessions, including our own faculties and attainments in the order of intelligence and character, our opinions, beliefs concerning what is good, what is stable'. [68]

In other words, renunciation involves the surrendering of one's comforts and attachments, the letting go of ego illusions that concern amongst many things, ambitions of power and wealth. What she is insisting upon is an acceptance of a void in ourselves. Each and every human being has to experience that complete and utter anguish, emptiness and loss in this world. As Weil puts it, worldly illusions, ego, nations and social institutions veil the void so that human suffering and death is ignored.[69] What she infers by this is that the individual must consent to utter anguish, emptiness and loss. This sort of language is not original in the language of mystical thought. Mystics have used the idea of the 'void' or what some scholars have termed the 'dark night' of the soul, to represent the experience of complete renunciation and emptiness.[70] But before I explore

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[65] FW, p. 288.
[66] P, p. 404.
[67] Ibid, p. 405.
[68] GG, pp. 31-2.
[69] SNL, p. 155.
[70] See, for example, Andrew Louth, *The Origins of The Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys,* pp. 179-190; Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Hidden Face of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little Brown,

this element of mystical tradition, it is important to clearly establish how the self is expected to respond to the reality of worldly renunciation.

According to Weil, to keep our attention on God followed by an undertaking of self-renunciation can only mean that the self, or what Weil calls the 'I' of a human being, has to be addressed in such a way that it can follow through with this mystical journey towards God.[71] In Simone Weil's view – and for this she is partly dependent upon Plato – the soul is divided into two parts: the natural, 'created' part which constitutes the major form of the soul, and an infinitesimally smaller part, which she calls the 'supernatural' or the 'uncreated' part.[72] The latter is discussed in due course, but the larger part of the soul is addressed in terms of Weil's preoccupation of how to draw the individual back to God, and what has to be done to this created part in order for their to be any meaningful contact between the human and the divine. Her essays from her 'school studies' illustrate how this aspect of the soul can become so utterly governed by its sinfulness and separation from God that it fails to erase the 'I', and instead, enforcing or fixing its created condition as a means by which to be accepted into the heavenly realms.[73] On the other hand, she is concerned to emphasize the mediocrity and stupidity of the 'I' in terms of one's inferiority and insignificance.[74] Once the individual comes to recognize this 'created' aspect of the soul as insignificant, then it can be destroyed. At this stage it is ready to receive the grace of God and be transported into divine consciousness.

With the nature of the 'I' expected to stand in its insignificance and simultaneously be transported into a situation of anguish, acceptance and loss, then the confrontation with the void is a necessary moment in the mystical life; it ultimately leads

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1995); Gregory of Nyssa, 'The Life of Moses' in *Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); John of the Cross, 'The Dark Night' and 'The Ascent of Mount Carmel' in *Selected Writings*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 41-210; Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 226-251.

[71] GG, pp. 23-27.

[72] FLN, p. 109.

[73] WFG, p. 102.

[74] As earlier investigations have emphasised, this interestingly ties in with Weil's own sense of mediocrity as described in her adolescent experiences and in relation to her family connections. Later on in her essays on school studies, Weil writes about her self-loathing and insignificance to her Catholic friend, Father Perrin. See WFG, p. 101.

to the death of the ego that facilitates a way toward God.[75] But again there is no definite promise in Weil's analysis: 'whoever endures a moment of the void either receives the supernatural bread or falls. It is a terrible risk, but one that must be run'.[76] What then ties together Weil's experience of slavery in her factory experiences and during her conversion experiences is the idea that to renounce this created aspect of the soul, the 'I', and experience the void, the individual has to empty itself of the world and to take on the form of a slave. One is then reduced to the point of nothing in space and time.[77] With Weil's concept of God orientated on the Platonic notion of the Good, located outside of this world, it was shown that the Good is beyond being, and therefore, God is beyond being.[78]

Therefore, with the human being expressing its nothingness in a similar way that God's absence in creation is an expression of His nothingness, it would appear that in terms of divine absence and human self-renunciation, nothingness and void-ness are the most appropriate means by which human beings can make contact with and partake in the good as God. In other words, the goal for human beings is to strive towards the good. Before developing Weil's wider metaphysical themes concerning the void and the dark night of the soul, it is, perhaps, by way of understanding these metaphors, worth evaluating them within the Christian tradition. As discussed in the previous chapter, Weil was inclined to establish a search for bridges within Platonic thought in terms of finding a way in which human suffering could bring the human being into contact with the divine. With this bridge revealed in the Crucifixion of Christ, the importance of these metaphors in the Christian mystical tradition would be helpful to understanding Weil's deeper intentions toward the significance of 'darkness' in relation to divine revelation.

4.5 *Weil and the 'Darkness' of Christian Mysticism*

The use of the metaphor of darkness in Christian mysticism has primarily been associated with what Andrew Louth sees as part of an apophatic tradition, (a tradition that is

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[75] N, p. 623.
[76] GG, p. 11.
[77] Ibid., p. 12.
[78] For a good discussion of Weil's understanding of God's 'non-being' see Cyril O' Regan, 'Countermimesis and Simone Weil's Christian Platonism' in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, eds. E J. Doering and Eric O. Springsted, pp. 186-90.

concerned with identifying the hidden relationship between the soul and God), which aims to criticize all forms of worldly attachment.[79] God, in this theology, is Divine Darkness in the sense that He limits the ability of human beings to imagine the fullness of the presence of the divine. The origin of this particular interpretation of the metaphor of 'darkness' is rooted in the Exodus story where Moses encounters God at Mount Sinai. As Nava describes in detail, God in the book of Exodus is described as 'hidden beneath the cloud of darkness that hovers over the Israelites in the desert. The cloud veils God's being'.[80] But as the previous chapter has also emphasized, Plato's 'Myth of the Cave' highlights a similar theme of darkness. Darkness from the cave is a metaphor of the human condition and how that condition is illuminated by the truth and the goodness of the sun – the Good. As far as the Fathers were concerned, darkness was employed from an intellectual and theoretical perspective, but in addition to this, particularly during the Middle Ages, the metaphor of darkness became more effective from an experiential point of view.[81]

The most common example, which Louth explores, is the experience of darkness and void in the form of an overwhelming love or one of internal pain and suffering.[82] But rather there being a concern to address 'darkness' in relation to illuminating the intellect, darkness in relation to the soul is a description of the inflow of God into the soul, 'which purges it of its habitual ignorance's and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology'.[83] Whilst there are several other interpretations of darkness in Christian mysticism – time is not available here to explore them in detail – there is a clear sense in which the Christian mystical tradition expresses a link between intellectual and experiential interpretations of darkness. The former elucidates the incompleteness of human knowledge and the failure of human beings to understand the nature of divine darkness. The later, however, refers to the experience of God's absence and the task of the human being to accept that absence in terms of how human suffering and affliction is a means by which the individual comes

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[79] Andrew Louth, *The Origins of The Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, pp. 173-78.
[80] For further discussion of this theme, see Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*, pp. 47-8.
[81] See Andrew Louth, *The Origins of The Christian Mystical Tradition*, pp. 179-80.
[82] Ibid., pp. 179-190
[83] See K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (trans.), *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS publications, 1991), II.v.1.

into contact with God. Weil expresses both these intellectual and experiential themes of darkness in her mystical theology. From the intellectual standpoint, she recognizes the limitations of human knowledge in relation to the divine, and the importance then of transcending intellectual thought in order for the mind to detach from and transcend worldly illusions.[84] Experientially, the 'I', the self, has to be renounced in order for the individual to make contact with God.[85]

Prior to an exploration into the implications of these specific mystical themes in Weil's writings, what is interesting to understand is how darkness and void is concerned not just with human renunciation but equally, as chapter III explored, divine renunciation. The theme of rejection from a human as well as a divine perspective simply alludes to Weil's understanding of the limits of creation. As the previous chapter illustrated, creation for Weil is itself a contradiction: 'it is contradictory that God, who is infinite, who is all, to whom nothing is lacking, should do something that is outside Himself, that is not Himself, while at the same time proceeding from Himself'.[86] Creation is an abdication of the omnipotence of God who is only all-powerful in that He willed his abdication. This abdication on the part of God is a renunciation. Divine renunciation then ensures that the divine resides outside of this world, and in order for human beings to make contact with God, they are expected to renounce their own created 'selves'. The point of identifying creation as a contradiction then is to transcend a particular and limited perspective in order to emerge 'from a point of view'. This emerging is what enables Weil to see simultaneously the separation and the relation between the created order and divine reality.

In that case, Weil's rejection of an 'ontology' of God and of the human being elucidates her overall mystical theology of worldly renunciation. That is to say, to appreciate the Good (as God) Weil insists that one has to empty oneself in order to create a space for an individual to make contact with the divine.[87] Accompanied by an explicit relation between the self and the divine, her drive towards self-renunciation is an attempt to ensure the human being gives full attention to God: 'May God grant me to become

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[84] IC, pp. 182ff.
[85] GG, p. 23.
[86] N, p. 386.
[87] See *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), p.79-84. Hereafter, cited as MILES.

nothing'.[88] But the repercussions of this personal asceticism, indeed her rejection of divine ontology, appear to place the human soul into exile from the world. Moreover, it gives a rather powerful image that on the macro-level the human and the divine appear to be separate from one another and their reconciliation close to impossible. As Susan Taubes puts it, for Weil, 'the dark night of God's absence is itself the soul's contact with God'.[89] What this means is that the dark night of the soul is the reality of the void, and that her theology ultimately speaking has no use or need of the resurrection.[90]

Therefore, to consider, generally speaking, whether there is a basis to argue that Weil's metaphysics is dualistic, the investigation has to assess if her doctrine of creation, mystical renunciation of the world and the destruction of the 'I' reflected in her writings on the void, contradiction, decreation, detachment, affliction and death, support the relation between the spiritual and the physical, and therefore, the meaningfulness and transformation of the human being into divine awareness.

The discussion now moves into an exploration of Weil's doctrine of creation by looking at the wider forces within and outside of the created order, that is to say, the forces of necessity within the created order (as discussed in chapter III) and the notion of the good as God outside of the created order. By reflecting upon these wider themes, Weil's use and understanding of contradiction will explain the way in which she draws the human being into divine consciousness through the void. Overall, addressing the tension in the relation between the human and the divine, and the role of the individual within this tension, is the next area of exploration into Weil's mystical theology.

4.6 *Weil: Coming into Contact with Worldlessness*

According to Weil, the human situation is bound between the forces of necessity and the good. Part of the discussion in Chapter III explored this relationship in terms of the relation between the individual and the collective within the polis. But having arrived at the 'door' of Weil's mystical theology, the discussion is elevated out of the polis for the moment and into the heart of the contradiction of the human condition, that is to say, the

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[88] GG, p. 30.
[89] Susan Taubes, 'The Absent God' *Toward a New Christianity*, ed. Thomas J. J. Altizer (New York: Harcourt, 1964), pp. 111-12.
[90] See Weil's essay, 'The Love of God and Affliction' in SNL, pp. 170-98.

tension and conflict of the human being in the world. Precisely, this condition describes how the individual, according to Weil, 'is subject to force, and craves for justice. He is subject to necessity and craves for the good'.[91] Chapter III identified the way in which the essential contradiction of this condition in human beings is the basis whereby she attempts to *deepen* the conditions and reality of our existence: 'the notion of *condition of existence* is for us the sole link between *good* and *necessity*'.[92] In order to deepen these conditions that break the human being into the real reality of human life, Weil wishes to elucidate the way contradictories are true: 'as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true'.[93] As we have seen, contradiction is a heuristic device – a means for emerging from 'the *point of view*'[94] so that one re-thinks certain thoughts and contemplates their truth. In this way, says Weil, 'every truth becomes a contradiction'.[95]

Since her thought, therefore, represents the reality of contradiction, which is so inextricably led by and also linked to her ordinary experiences, for example, between the forces of necessity and the good and the reality of suffering and affliction, one finds that the void is the result of reaching the heart of contradiction. The truth of it for Simone Weil is the absence and hiddenness of God in the world, the irresolvable division between an imperfect human being and a perfect God – the contradiction of the cosmos – which conversely by his absence, is the way in which divine love manifests his presence in the world. In this, Weil argues that the infinite distance that separates the good from necessity means 'they have nothing in common'. But through the incommensurability between these forces, she is compelled to 'assign them a unity' – this unity representing not only mystery, but a means by which all sorts of bridges to God can be established.[96] Like the Gnostics, for Weil, 'it remains for us a secret' in which the genuine [...] life is the contemplation of this unknown unity'.[97]

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[91] GaG, p. 37; see also, OL, pp. 173-4.
[92] N, p. 266.
[93] GG, p. 92-93.
[94] N, p. 46.
[95] Ibid., p. 410.
[96] OL, p. 174.
[97] Ibid. Similarly, strands of Gnostic thought advocate this unity between the two worlds in the sense that becoming aware of *gnosis* does not mean that we reject our humanity. This, the Gnostic prophet, Marsanes similarly illustrates: the 'sense-perceptible world is worthy of being saved entirely'. See J. M. Robinson

But prior to arriving at this point, these forces of contradiction[98] operate upon the human condition so that ultimately the void becomes an inescapable reality: it is the anguished experience of losing balance,[99] but simultaneously working towards spiritual fulfillment and a restoration of balance. The aim of this section of Chapter IV is to investigate the *way* in which she approaches this contradiction from the standpoint of the interrelation of her assessment of the human condition, religious and social experiences and her overall theological inquiries. In this section, further inquiries attempt to ascertain and investigate whether in fact Weil is able to find a sense of restoration (or fulfillment) with contradiction through the manner in which she rests in and relates to the void.[100]

Therefore, considering the nature of the void is to consider the functional elements that lead to an experience of it, that is, the constitutive elements that lead to and determine how 'detached' sensations from this world unfold in human life. Also, it is to consider our response to those sensations in terms of experiences of the void in respect of its spiritual and salvific implications. In this case, considerations of the void firstly require a further discussion of Weil's notion of necessity in itself and in relation to the good, and a detailed evaluation of her idea of decreation that is based upon God's absence and divine darkness in the world.

This will lead, secondly, towards a detailed discussion of the nature and implications of Gnostic thought in Weil's writings, and how neo-gnosticism will be shown to bring forward divine awareness in the individual, but without the idea that one has to reject one's essential nature. This attempts to re-address Gnostic interpretations in terms of illuminating Weil's sense of worldlessness, and her difficulty of holding together the relation between the human and the divine. Yet, prior to this stage, the investigation now considers the experiential elements of darkness and void in tandem with the forces of necessity operating in the created order.

(ed.), 'Marsanes', in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English,* p. 463. See also, R. T. Wallis, *Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 263.

[98] Ibid., p. 156.

[99] The British philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, interprets a section of her work, 'void', as a topic that can equally be called 'despair' or 'affliction'. See I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 498-503.

[100] N, p. 215.

4.7 *Experiencing the Void (1): 'Necessity', 'Decreation' and the Supernatural Soul*

The notion of Necessity, as chapter III illustrated, is an essential aspect of Weil's social and political writings. What is even more interesting, however, is how necessity is vital in Weil's religious writings. In terms of her social preoccupations, necessity was understood as antagonistic matter, foreign and indifferent to human relations. But she also understands necessity to be a network of ordered relationships that would enable workers to relate to and make contact with the eternal world. Using her notion of contradiction, which aims to emerge from a point of view, Necessity, in Weil's late religious writings, develops in a similar format. Necessity, she says, is like 'a coin with two faces', that is to say, a natural force in the universe that has two different forms of reality, leading to two very different outcomes for a human being.[101]

One of these forms is a crushing necessity which destroys a person, and the other, a divine necessity that is ordered and balanced and enables one to connect with the supernatural world. Overall, however, necessity defines the condition of the sensible world in which we find ourselves, and by means of experience, it leans its brutal weight of 'gravity' upon the entire human being, in body, mind and soul. The forces of necessity are always likely to impede the individual from connecting, from within his soul, with its transcendent orientation to the supernatural. Necessity is incommensurable with the good, but strangely, if we consent to its forces, it acts as a medium, a 'metaxu' through which God makes contact with us.[102] Consequently, it is important to understand necessity in its relation to the created world and God. It is important to acknowledge that the idea of necessity has several potential sorts of relations between the created world and God, and Weil's understanding of this multiplicity of the relations of necessity is reflected in her deep association with Plato's meditation on it, discussed in his doctrine of creation in the *Timaeus*.[103] Nevertheless, a concern with Weil's necessity in creation is the relation it has with the void and her belief in the distance between God and humanity. It is this

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[101] SNL, pp. 186-88.
[102] See GG, pp. 132-34.
[103] For a full discussion of this see D. Allen & E. O. Springsted, 'Divine Necessity: Weilian and Platonic Conceptions' and 'The Concept of Reading and the Book of Nature', in *Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil*, pp. 33-52.

perspective in conjunction with the Platonic notion of the Good, discussed in chapter III that illustrates Weil's personal experience and thought *in* the void experience.

The essential point about the reality of creation, in Weil's world, is that God is the good. For her, this supernatural principle is not contained within material phenomena, but outside of it – outside the space-time continuum. Nevertheless, within the whole make-up of the human soul there is an aspect of it that longs for the absolute good and is not satisfied by the material phenomena of this world. God exists outside of this world,[104] which must imply that if God is the Good, then the Good is also outside of this world. Since there is an aspect of the soul that possesses a 'knowingness' of the good, Weil says that one ought to not detach the faculties that are necessary to appreciate the things of this world which exist, and therefore relate to existence. Rather, one must instead 'detach from them the faculty which is related to the good, that is to say, the faculty of love'.[105] I will refer later as to how this faculty allows the part of the soul to journey towards absolute good, but in the meantime, I wish to explore the deeper truths and implications of necessity which are important for the construction of Simone Weil's universe as it relates to the two parts of the soul already mentioned.

According to Weil, 'necessity is God's veil'.[106] When we consider the realm of necessity and the reality of the good, within the context of creation, one finds that she offers an extraordinary explanation of the human situation. This explanation brings about two different perspectives on the notion of necessity. Creation, according to Weil, is abandonment – God's *voluntary* renunciation to the forces of matter and necessity: 'because he is the creator, God is not all-powerful. Creation is abdication. But he is all-powerful in the sense that his abdication is voluntary. He knows its effects, and wills them'.[107] This act of creation is supremely *willed* in the crucifixion. Christ, for Weil, becomes an expression of the nearness and distance of God in creation through the necessary and the good:

> God and creation are One; God and creation are infinitely distant from each other: this fundamental contradiction is reflected in that between the necessary

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[104] Ibid., p. 139.
[105] Ibid., pp. 315-16.
[106] GG, p. 94.
[107] Ibid., p. 120.

> and the good. To feel this distance means a spiritual quartering, it means crucifixion.[108]

One of the revelations of the crucifixion is that Christ himself did not know the truth of abandonment until his destiny was experienced on the Cross. The Cross is the manifestation of creation: 'God abandons our whole being – flesh, blood, sensibility, intelligence, love – to the pitiless necessity of matter and the cruelty of the devil, except for the eternal and supernatural part of the soul'.[109] Christ, says Weil, only becomes aware of this on the Cross. I will return to Weil's thoughts on the Incarnation later in relation to the connection between necessity and affliction. In the meantime, this aspect constitutes the first perspective of Weil's necessity, that is, creation has an independent existence in which necessity is distant from absolute goodness. For the human being, this aspect of force is crushing to the human being. This is tantamount to what Weil considers as hell.[110]

The second perspective is different: necessity is independent of matter; it 'behaves' as a network of 'ordered' relations that are immaterial and without force.[111] Necessity in this context 'can only be perfectly conceived so long as such relations appear as absolutely immaterial'.[112] This sense of immateriality in necessity amounts to what she regards as divine necessity – in balance and equilibrium, it taps into the deepest parts of the soul.[113] But how does one come to this realization? An answer to this brings one back to the recurring theme of the act of decreation, which, in short, is Weil's description of the process a person undergoes in order to realize that it is nothing, indeed, the path it needs to take to become nothing. Decreation, therefore, defines our spiritual realization or awakening to the fact that a human being exists as two divided parts – the natural, created aspect of personality and the uncreated aspect as the soul, the

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[108] N, p. 400.
[109] GaG, pp. 47-48.
[110] SNL, pp. 172-3.
[111] For a detailed discussion of this, see D. Allen & E. O. Springsted, 'Divine Necessity: Weilian and Platonic Conceptions' in *Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil,* pp. 42-47. Springsted also notes that there is a difference between Weil's idea of 'conditional necessity' and the 'conditional necessity' in 'The Pythagorean Doctrine'. See ibid., p. 220. For the purpose of my discussion, I will not be discussing these differences.
[112] NR, p. 277.
[113] In this way, Weil encouraged a stoic acceptance of necessity. See S. Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian.

supernatural, uncreated form which is God himself.[114] With these two parts, Weil says one has to detach oneself from the natural aspect related to the sway of needs in order to conceive Necessity's relations of immaterial purity. These relations can be perceived by renouncing the first person: 'Necessity is an enemy of man as long as he thinks in the first person'.[115]

Therefore, if we think in this way and know that we are nothing and that being somebody is an illusion, one can see that God's creation is an abdication, and in order to return to nothingness, one must renounce existence, renounce the self or 'I'. 'God created me as non-being which has the appearance of existing, in order that through love I should renounce what I think is my existence and so emerge from non-being'.[116] To emerge from non-being is to bring forward the supernatural, uncreated aspect of the soul. The result is that the personality is gradually exalted so that there is no "I". The "I" instead, belongs to non-being. By renouncing this apparent existence one can then be 'annihilated by the plenitude of being'.[117]

By renouncing the *condition* of the first person, the personality, the small, uncreated, supernatural aspect of the soul instead allows a person by *his own actions* to consent to the forces of the universe in spite of its reigning negativities.[118] By coming to realize the good, the soul splits into two facets, entering into an experience of the void. This void 'expands' into a space of darkness that brings forward the separation between physical and spiritual realities, and the soul that becomes nothing comes to this realization. In this space, allowing and waiting for the good to travel across space-time in order to recognize the union of goodness with the divine consent is love, and such love for Weil means to go on loving God in spite of whatever anguish and despair a person

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[114] See FLN, p. 103. See also, J. P. Little, 'Simone Weil's Concept of Decreation: True Perspective and Right Action', in Richard Bell, ed. *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*, pp.6-7.
[115] IC, p. 180.
[116] FLN, p. 95
[117] Ibid., p. 96.
[118] So long as we think in the first person, says Weil, 'we see necessity from below, from inside, it encloses us on all sides as the surface of the earth and the arc of the sky. From the time we renounce thinking in the first person, by consent to necessity, we see it from outside, beneath us for we have passed to God's side. The side which is turned to us before, and still presents to almost the whole of our being, the natural part of ourselves, is brute domination. The side which it presents after this operation, to the fragment of our mind which has passed to the other side, is pure obedience'. See IC, pp. 186-7

encounters in their experience of universal forces.[119] With human freedom in place, the individual consents to necessity and moves toward the divine in pure obedience: 'the side which it presents after this operation, to the fragment of our mind which has passed to the other side, is pure obedience'.[120] Everything in pure obedience is then subject to perfect beauty. In this state of perfection, says Weil, there is the realization of the perfect, heavenly Father. If, on the other hand, a human being is unprepared, that is to say, if, for example, the first form of necessity comes into operation, crushing a person from the outside, then he or she loses their vital freedom to consent to become nothing. Without consent one is reduced to a subhuman level which is equivalent to an experience of hell.

4.8 *Experiencing the Void (2): Emerging from the 'Point of View'*

Consequently, the second perspective of powerless, immaterial relations in necessity, suggests, first of all, that all reality is primarily determined by necessity,[121] and that secondly, to recognize this truth one has to be able by his or her own choice to consent to it in order to become nothing so that one connects with the supernatural realm of Weil's universe. In which case, given that God has withdrawn from our world, He therefore 'trusts' the power of necessity to be a force that limits the possibility of chaos – a 'master' of this world though under the authorization of divinity: 'God wills necessity', indeed, 'God makes himself necessity'.[122] When one concedes necessity (so that we are not subordinate to it) in the form of obedience, our perspective changes to a higher plane of consciousness so that necessity which is now good itself, is in fact, says Weil, a 'μεταξύ' between oneself (matter), and the good, (supernatural). As discussed in Chapter III, the contradiction of necessity[123] in relation to the good is resolved on a higher plane of understanding. To resolve contradiction so that one perceives necessity in this way, that is, so that one is able to perceive a connection between necessity and the good, requires the act of decreation at the start. The emerging, uncreated aspect of the soul then

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[119] WFG, p. 160.
[120] IC, p. 187.
[121] N, p. 365.
[122] Ibid., p. 266, 190.
[123] 'Contradiction contains in itself Necessity', which Weil says, 'represents the whole of Necessity in a nutshell'. See ibid., pp. 330-1.

has no desire to concede to mechanical force given that it no longer perceives reality mechanically, that is, as a force which burdened the created aspect of the human soul in the first place. Rather, the awakening supernatural aspect as the true self of a human being continually emerges through the forces of this world into divine reality and therefore, the realization of the self/soul as and in that reality. Therefore, could this aspect perhaps not recognize the purpose and significance of necessity as the good, which Weil does assert, but in such a way that it recognizes creation as God and God as creation?

The point that is being made here is that for Weil the uncreated aspect allows the soul simply to manage more appropriately the forces of necessity that operate in the created world. But this perspective does not in any way bring us to the point in which this supernatural aspect drastically illuminates our perception of reality. It just gives the human being the strength to go on loving, (consent), in the hope that, as Weil says, God crosses the universe and comes to us.

This addresses the issue that the alliance between the natural and supernatural world in Weil's universe is based on nothing further than a human being's ability to consent to the nature of this world in order to connect with the world beyond. God is still outside this world as 'a reality outside [...] space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties'.[124] Behind this resolution (as the veil of consent) towards the duality between God and creation there remains in the very act of consent, the irresolvable division within her 'two-worlds theory'. Moreover, this alliance also alludes to a sort of living reality in which Simone Weil finds nothing of value in the personality, or even without personality. Her desire to renounce the first person in the first place, the isolation and disappearance of her inner-life and deep sense of being set apart from the world would have certainly perpetuated this belief in personality. What experience within us therefore, enables a human being to acquire a sense in which it participates in the living reality of the divine if the uncreated aspect of the human soul simply amounts to nothing? As Weil struggles to embrace the contradiction and difference between the natural and supernatural within the universe, the

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[124] MILES, pp. 221-22.

human soul, or her soul,[125] it seems appropriate that she would seem incapable of being enriched by 'the other' of personality, the impersonal non-being, for as she says, we have no right to recognize the existence of our non-being.[126]

In that case, salvation for Simone Weil can only be a matter of despair for since it is the result of an inability to embrace this sense of difference that sets up an act of violence within dualistic thought. The French mystic, Thérèse of Lisieux and her existential anthology on personality and God elucidates this point further.[127] Thérèse conceived the experience of being in the non-being or nothingness of God. She writes of an awareness of her own nothingness and of a fog that once engulfed her'.[128] The void, nothingness, or non-being, contrary to Weil, included a sense of being which manifested through what Thérèse describes as the safety of the divine. The difference between the two, therefore, is eschatological: Thérèse sees being-ness in nothingness (non-being) held by the divine, whereas for Weil, nothingness becomes just non-being.[129] For Simone Weil, the existential relation of the self towards this goal of salvation is (through decreation) to 'disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfectly beautiful'.[130] She desires to cease to be, and she wishes to keep it that way. She has no intention to work towards the possibility that our awakening to non-being can operate as a form of being, held by the supernatural, but in the world. Therefore, the soteriological path of decreation in and through contradiction is limited by Weil's presupposition that the relation between 'imperfect man and perfect God' is subject to an irrevocable division between worlds. Such an unwillingness to accept the reality of difference only goes to show that the polarity she conceived within it made her essentially rootless, spinning her

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[125] The individual's relation to the impersonal requires an effort to obliterate the 'I' of identity, 'such that there is not a part left in his soul to say "I"'. See ibid. Contrary to Weil, the American Novelist, Michelle Cliff, having rooted herself out of isolation, argues that the desire to erase the "I" can also be the desire to deny the difference, to deny contradiction, in other words, that within us which the dominant culture has taught us is other, alien, wrong. See C. Ascher, L. Desalvo, S. Ruddick (ed.), *Between Women*, p. 320.

[126] FLN, p. 97.

[127] See T. Lisieux, *Story of a Soul, The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux,* trans. J. Clarke, pp. 212-13.

[128] See P. C. Morea, *Towards a Liberal Catholicism*, p. 3, 5-6, 50-54, 135-39, 159-62.

[129] This is one indication that Weil is unable to pass through the void, which moreover, raises the question as to whether she ever managed to endure the void given that one of her sincere limitations in life was her lack of experience in suffering and affliction, and her sense of having to reorder and re-evaluate the conditions of society in order to meet several spiritual criteria for a person to consent to an annihilation of one's personality. Contrary to Thérèse, Weil struggled to recognize the transcendence of these experiences.

[130] PG, p. 50.

into isolation, or precisely, into a state of permanent 'non-being' from which she struggled to emerge.[131]

Furthermore, Weil's inclination to overcome and avoid the contradiction and difference between the natural and supernatural world is perpetuated by her need to distinguish several different perspectives of necessity that illustrate a sense in which she could not accept certain kinds of contradictions in the world. Her general lack of accepting necessity in contradiction means that she could not see a way through it, which explains why her perception of divine reality becomes a fixed, indeterminate ideal: it saves her from self-recognition in contradictory experience since it is resolved on a higher plane of reality. But Weil does not stop there: not only is she inclined to use the divine as an ideal in the transformation of the individual but equally in that of society.[132]

The implication of this becomes a fatal mistake for Weil, for now she looks to the transformation of social and political relations of a society in order that a transformation of conditions of force in necessity serve as a 'less servile form'[133] in which an individual would then concede to nothingness for salvation. The problem that Weil encounters is that to develop an 'ideal' kind of society without contradiction rather than a society within contradiction, in retrospect, is a reflection not of *this* world but her world of abstraction.[134] Weil's world becomes a quasi-natural reality because the supernatural element of her metaphysics is already presupposed in the framework of this reality, which is then expected to work towards an understanding of the human situation for salvation. But the result does not in any way show how an individual lives with and through contradiction in *this* world. Rather it attempts to illustrate how a person might live in a supernatural universe like Weil's whereby a set of pre-conditional relations for living in this world, and therefore, our experience of contradiction, amount to the nature of *her* world of 'ideal conditions'. This does not necessarily relate to the world in which *we* live and experience contradiction. There is no sense, in other words, in which her system demonstrates in some way, how *we* are able to respond to, engage and work with contradiction in *our* living experiences.

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[131] C. Ascher, L. Desalvo, S. Ruddick (ed.), *Between Women*, pp. 323-24.
[132] See Weil's essay on 'Human Personality from 1943. See SE, pp. 9-34; MILES, pp. 71ff.
[133] Alexander Nava, *The Mystical and Prophetic Thought of Simone Weil and Gustavo Gutiérrez*, p. 36.
[134] See OL, p. 56. This will be given further attention in the last chapter of this thesis on salvation.

The heart of the matter with Weil and her belief that salvation comes through despair is that she never came to truly understand suffering and despair because she never experienced it *beyond* her capacity to control it.[135] In other words, Weil was able to determine her own kind of experiences,[136] the majority of which she was desperate to associate with universal despair and anguish in the oppressed and working class of French social and political relations. By passing this association through the supernatural, she would illustrate how human beings can be saved from this world.[137]

4.9 *Experiencing the Void (3): The Consequences of Unity in Contradiction*

Weil's inclination to resolve the human condition given the predicaments she perceived within her political and social relations suggest that she was driven to get individuals and social structures to recognize their supernatural purity and quality. This is why she commits on her part, to a life of self-sacrifice for the external world. But this self-sacrifice is not selfless. Through one of her many contradictory citations about God, (it is the one whereby 'he knows all things, for he is truth' and yet 'he is ignorant of all things, for he is outside time') that Weil's agenda is apparent.[138] Her spiritual vocation of self-sacrifice is the task she sets herself to do what God cannot, or, is unable to do. This agenda, however, to act on behalf of God's 'shortcomings' profoundly characterizes what Weil's closest friend, Gustav Thibon, describes as her hero status with a 'transcendental ego':

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[135] See R. Rees, *Discussions of Simone Weil*, ed. D. Z. Phillips, p. 118. See also, PT, pp. 87-88. Nevertheless, there were moments in her life where she experienced intense physical pain and being psychologically in a wretched condition, she made a connection with God. See for example, WG, pp. 15-34.

[136] See for example, CO, which details the majority of Weil's experiences of factory work. See also Weil's 'Factory Journal' in FW, pp. 155-226.

[137] See R. H. Bell, '"The Secret of the Human Condition": Power, Oppression, Work and Liberty – A brief Retrospective' and 'A New Virtue of Justice: Love, Friendship and "Madness"' in *Simone Weil: The Way of Justice as Compassion*, pp. 21-32 & 57-76. See also, C. Fischer, 'Simone Weil and the Civilization of Work', in R. H. Bell (ed.), *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture,* 189-213. Here Fischer assesses the spiritual nature of work within social relations of contemporary society which correlate with Weil's belief in the spirituality of work as a result of the moral, physical and emotional horror and degradation of factory work.

[138] N, p. 265.

> "The religious man thinks only of himself", said Nietzsche. This is true in every sense of those pious folk of an inferior order who neglect their most obvious duties to follow an imaginary vocation, and it is still true *in one sense* of heroes and saints who have not achieved within themselves the supreme self-surrender.[139]

This lack of self-surrender suggests that she could not perceive the being-ness of the human soul in its state of non-being with God. That is to say, through decreation, the feeling of nothingness did not bring for Weil a sense of upliftment, or indeed fulfillment, of the supernatural in this world. If decreation is the process whereby the soul gradually begins to die from the illusory life, then to accept the process of *how* that death manifests itself through the forces of necessity is the point at which the void is created. Weil comes to recognize the act of decreation, which includes an experience of the void, but she fails to accept and embrace the transformative process involved in the juxtaposition of the decreative act and the void experience. This is particularly evident given her attempts to set the good (the supernatural) as a basis for her social and political relations. Moreover, she seems unwilling to accept the reality of our identity with God.[140] Taking into account her situation, it would appear to be natural for Weil truly to understand the nature of suffering and despair and her motivation toward self-sacrifice and self-denial in the way that she did. But what this ultimately implies is that she struggled to concede to and recognize the validity of the forces of this reality just as they are.

Weil's struggle then to bridge the supernatural with the natural world is particularly evident. Moreover, her failure in which to identify the divinity of her soul in which to then work in and with contradictory experience is the reason why neo-Gnosticism is so useful. Broadly speaking, neo-gnostic thinking attempts to fully identify the divinity of the soul and the importance of contradictory experience.[141] First of all, as I suggested in chapter II, her affinity with Gnosticism, particularly the Cathars is relevant to using Gnostic thought as an 'instrument' in which to unwind the structure of her thoughts. In addition to Platonism, there were for Weil resources to be found in a strange and diverse world of Gnosticism, particularly the Cathars,[142] who also advocated that

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[139] PT, pp. 117-18.
[140] FLN, p. 97.
[141] See J.J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries*, p. 25.
[142] For Weil's affinity with the Cathars, see as an example, J. Cabaud, *Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love*, 218-24. The Cathars are supposed to have originated from the Bogomils in Southeastern France, during the

knowledge, 'gnosis', is the key to our salvation. Further, like Weil, Gnosticism posits that God is absent from the world; that the world of the supernatural, the real world, is at an infinite distance from the world human beings inhabit. But in terms of earlier discussions that have alluded to Weil's rejection of everything that is human, the Gnostics, incidentally, are about becoming aware of our divinity and not about rejecting our humanity.[143] 'Gnosis is not retreating from life; it is valuing human incarnation, and therefore, creation, as a precious opportunity to commune with the Oneness (supernatural) through the multiplicity (natural), 'to discover the Good through the good and bad, to find Love through separation'.[144]

The purpose of exploring neo-gnosticism then is to understand the spirituality of Gnosticism through the orientation of the individual 'self' that would enable the link between the natural and supernatural world to be recognised through difference, and therefore, contradiction. This final part of the investigation aims to assess this non-dualistic affinity between the individual and its creator, 'living as God and man'.[145] Therefore, several discussions on contemporary Gnostic thought are intended to address two things. Firstly, the relation between the origins of man, and the salvation of the spiritual origin and development of the individual; secondly, the relationship between this interpretation of Gnosticism and the nature of Weil's spiritual anthropology, particularly in terms of how salvation for her in this world is endlessly rooted in the despair and anguish of human existence. In this way, the discussion considers that Weil still keeps God at a distance from creation by believing that the void must be endured *for the sake* of

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Middle Ages. Bogmolism developed in Bulgaria as a result of the tensions between Byzantine and Bulgar powers in the late ninth century. During the tenth century a Bulgarian village priest assumed the name Bogomil (meaning 'worthy of the pity of God'), where he then preached a dualistic faith. These teachings gradually spread throughout southeastern Europe during the tenth and eleventh century, and it was a dualistic sect in the area of Languedoc, which took the name of Cathari, 'The Pure Ones', from the Greek term *Katharos* meaning 'pure'. See E. Peters, (ed.), *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe* (London: Scholar Press, 1980), pp. 103-104. See also, T. Churton, *The Gnostics* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1987), pp. 68-76, 79-80, 95-6; S. O' Shea *The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Death of the Medieval Cathars* (London: Profile, 2001); R. Weis, *The Yellow Cross: The Story of the Last Cathars* (London: Vicking, 2000). See also, J. L. Nelson 'Catharama', in *London Review of Books*, (2001), pp. 28-9. For Weil's affiliation with Catharism, see P, pp. 394-95; SL pp. 129-31.

[143] See T. Freke & P. Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians*, p. 178.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

God's love, rather than for an understanding or a knowing (Gnosis)[146] *of the love* of God in which the individual attempts to embody in its life. In hindsight, an exploration of neo-Gnosticism also lays the foundation for further discussion on Weil's idea of affliction – extreme suffering[147] – and the way in which contemporary Gnostic thought sheds the light on this experience as 'many psychic deaths to find unity in the Spirit' (God).[148]

4.10 *Passing through the Void: Contemporary Neo-Gnosticism*

4.10.1 Gnosis of the Soul

The realm of neo-Gnostic thought to which I refer rests upon our acquaintance with the Nag Hammadi Collection.[149] Further, its immediate impact on the world of psychology through the work of the Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, offered a fresh insight into its significance that was independent of the body of Gnostic literature of Christian antiquity.[150] Fundamentally, Jung perceived in the soul an inbuilt mechanism that constituted the possibility of self-realization – the process of individuation. The Jungian approach expresses Gnosis as a matter of experience, 'that in short Gnosis is the mythic expression of self-experience'.[151] This alters the dynamic of Gnostic interpretation, for where Gnostic texts in relation to God have been interpreted as a purely historical,

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[146] See V. White, *God and the Unconscious* (London: Harvill Press, 1952), 207.

[147] When our suffering is extreme (affliction) says Weil, it creates a feeling of impossibility, since we cannot avoid it: 'this feeling of impossibility is the feeling of the void. By contemplating it for a long time in a spirit of acceptance, we open the way to grace'. See N, 146.

[148] J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries,* 57.

[149] For an introduction into the discovery and content of this literature see J. M. Robinson, 'Introduction', in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English,* 1-26.

[150] Gilles Quispel made contact with Carl Jung in 1947 with an article that attempted to subordinate the views of Valentinus' students to what Quispel calls the 'original doctrine of the Master himself'. This article was also sent, yet without response, to Karl Barth and Aldous Huxley. In his essay, 'Gnosis and Psychology', Quispel explores and attempts to connect ancient Gnosticism to Jungian Psychology, which gives a brief discussion of Jung's association with the Nag Hammadi collection and his overall acquaintance with Gnostic principles through his own psychological propositions. See G. Quispel, 'Gnosis and Psychology', in B. Layton (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), vol. 1, 17-31. Also printed in R. A. Segal, *The Gnostic Jung*, 239-56, and in R. A. Segal (ed.), *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture,* 10-25. For further commentaries on Jung and Gnosticism, see also V. White *God and the Unconscious*, pp. 203-227; June Singer, *Seeing Through the Visible World* (San Francisco: Harper Press, 1990), 96-102; F. C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp. 43-4; Jeff Dehing, 'Jung and Knowledge: From Gnosis to Praxis', *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 35 (1990), 377-96.

[151] R. A. Segal (ed.), *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture,* 10-25.

mythological phenomenon, Jung understands Gnosticism as a revelation of the individual. Moreover, the Gnostic element conjoined with Jungian psychology aims to establish contemporary Gnosticism as an exploration into the depths of the human soul.[152] Jung concedes that the Gnostics were unaware of any potential psychological meanings within their work because they were dealing with both their inner realities as well as the universe: 'The Gnostics projected their subjective inner perception ...into a cosmogonic system and believed in the metaphysical reality of its psychological figures'.[153] Nevertheless, Jung's strong convictions about Gnosticism arose from his discovery that the Gnostics 'were apparently the first thinkers to concern themselves with the contents of the collective unconscious'.[154] In fact, 'Gnosis is undoubtedly a psychological knowledge whose contents derive from the unconscious,' and that many Gnostics were nothing other than psychologists in their outlook.[155]

4.10.2 The Gnostic, Cosmological System

Before, however, I can illustrate a full connection between Jungian psychology and Gnostic thought, it is important to give an account of the Gnostic, cosmological system in order to correlate it with psychological appraisals and therefore outline how Gnostic psychology supports the inner journey of the soul back to the original source – the Godhead.[156]

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[152] As Hurtak comments, 'the personality of self must have its inner depth'. See J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries*, p. 12. In relation to Jung, refer to the discovered codex, 'The Gospel of Truth', named after him. He identifies the commensurability between his own psychological preoccupation and this Gnostic codex from the Nag Hammadi collection. See Jung's translation in M. Stein, 'The Gnostic Critique, Past, Present and Future', in R. A. Segal (ed.), *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture,* pp. 44-47. See also H. W. Attridge and G. W. MacRae (trans.), 'The Gospel of Truth', in *The Nag Hammadi Collection in English,* pp. 38-51.

[153] C. G. Jung, 'Psychology in the Classical Age: The Gnostics, Tertullian, Origen', in *Psychological Types*, trans. H.G. Baynes (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 19.

[154] C. G. Jung, 'Religion and Psychology: A Reply to Martin Buber', in *The Symbolic Life*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1977), pp. 663-64. See also, H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 286. Here, Jonas refers to the use of imagery and psychological terms derived from the ritual of the mystery-religions in order to describe the phenomenon of the inner ascent of the soul 'ending in a mystical ecstasis'. He also refers to Plotinus and the Neoplatonic school and their articulation of these stages from a psychological perspective, though conversely, one must bear in mind that Plotinus was intolerant towards the Gnostics, particularly with their conception of creation. See D. J. O'Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 73-5.

[155] C. G. Jung, 'The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales', in *Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1959), pp. 222-23.

[156] The Gnostic myth explored here is based upon 'the Valentinian Speculation' or 'Ptolemy's system' (Ptolemy was a Gnostic teacher and disciple of Valentinus). See 'The Valentinian Speculation' in H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion,* pp. 174ff. This is reported at length, but unclearly according to some sources, by the

The Gnostic system is made up of three different dramas – the Archetypal, Cosmic and Human – with the Cosmic and Human being a copy of the Archetypal Drama. The myth begins with the presupposition that creation has a beginning and an end, with the end being a return to the beginning. At the beginning of the origination of the cosmos there is already the existence of an eternity of being, a *Pleroma*, (Fullness). At the 'center' of this Pleroma is always the 'The Primal Parent' or the 'Father'.[157] The Pleroma is made up of *aeons* (archetypes) that emanate 'forming a blueprint for all that subsequently comes into existence'.[158] The opposite of Pleroma is *Kenoma*, which means, 'emptiness'. Interestingly, the myth of Pleroma and Kenoma illustrate the relation between the supernatural and natural worlds respectively in Weil's cosmological system. At the twelve and last aeon of Consciousness, Sophia (Soul) becomes unstable within the Pleroma because of her desire to know the Father. Attempting to conceive the inconceivable, Sophia synthesizes ignorance and error[159] which creates the kenoma.

This realm is the universe of appearances, which becomes soul trapped in matter. The existence of the kenoma in contrast to the Pleroma represents Sophia's ignorance as the fallen goddess, Achamouth, who now represents soul imprisoned by matter. Representing the Consciousness of God, the Father, Christ awakens the fallen goddess by awakening her from this imprisonment and liberating her Consciousness with an experience of *metanoia.*[160] This experience begins the search for gnosis, the light of the pleroma, the original source. Achamouth in turn, creates the Demiurge – a creator – who brings forth the nature and existence of our world of appearances.[161] The duality set about by our creation establishes this 'Cosmic' followed by 'Human Drama' which are

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Church Father, Irenaeus. The Gnostic writer, Bentley Layton has managed to illustrate a systematic appraisal of Ptolemy's version found in Irenaeus but also drawing upon other sources. See B. Layton, 'Ptolemy's Version of the Gnostic Myth' in *The Gnostic Sciptures: Ancient Wisdom for the New Age* (London: Doubleday and Co., 1987), pp. 276ff.

[157] See T. Churton, *The Gnostics,* p. 54.

[158] According to Ptolemy's myth, the 'thirty silent and unrecognizable aeons' make up the Pleroma, and include Intelligence (Nous), Truth (Logos), Life etc.

[159] See B. Layton, *The Gnostic Sciptures: Ancient Wisdom for the New Age*, p. 284. See also, H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion,* 183; H. W. Attridge and G. W. MacRae (trans.), 'The Gospel of Truth', in *The Nag Hammadi Collection in English,* pp. 38-51.

[160] 'Metanoia' is a term that translates as 'redemption', which for the Gnostics, is a signal that one is ready to embark on the process of soul initiation, that is, to 'know oneself', to know one's personality in this world, followed by a pneumatic initiation, which is to know who we really are. See H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion,* pp. 60-2.

[161] This entity believes to be the Lord of the Universe, failing to recognize however, that Christ and the fallen goddess are working through him to create the world of appearances.

imperfect copies of the pleromic archetypes. Yet, the new aeon, Christ, directly through Achamouth stretches along the divide, a barrier called the Cross, or Middle, the intermediary space between the kenoma and pleroma ready to illuminate her Consciousness as genuine gnosis. In turn, she passes these 'seeds of Consciousness', without the Demiurge knowing, in his creation which includes human beings. In this way, our illumination by Gnosis brings forth a 'genuine manifestation of "Christ-awareness"', which are these seeds of Consciousness illuminated through matter.[162]

The details of each drama are detailed by Ptolemy with our existence in creation set to facilitate our return from this stage of duality and ignorance (through metanoia) to the stage of non-duality which is our 'true pleromic or heavenly nature'. We are the 'seeds of Consciousness' trapped in ignorance, ready to mature to realize true Gnosis.[163] This account of the Gnostic system enables us to draw a parallel with a psychological framework in order to describe the process of the soul's illumination from illusion into truth.

4.10.3 Jung's Interpretation of Gnostic Myths

Jung believed that consciousness emerges from the unconscious.[164] By 'consciousness', he argues that the human being develops a sense of an awareness of itself as an autonomous, independent personality or 'I' from both the physical world and the natural, unconscious realm of mind. According to Jung, an exploration of the soul requires a journey into the unconscious, symbolizing the godhead – primordial, the source of completeness, self-sufficiency and perfection within the universe. The creation of matter symbolizes only the beginning of the emergence of the ego out of the unconscious. The actual emergence of the ego is not exclusive to the creation of the Demiurge, but the specific creation and existence of individual human beings: 'the ego is symbolized [...]

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[162] See J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries,* 69. For a clear illustration of the Gnostic System and its stages, see ibid., pp. 85-7.

[163] An account of the Cosmic and Human Dramas, see T. Freke & P. Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians,* 144-47. See also, G. R. S. Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (New York: University Press, 2nd ed. 1960), p. 313, 420ff.

[164] For a discussion of this, see C. J. Jung, 'Analytical psychology', in *The Symbolic Life,* vol. 18, trans. R. F. C. Hull, pp. 8-10; 'The Stages in Life', in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche,* vol. 8, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1960), pp. 386-92.

by the thinking part of the human body – the unspecified center of human thoughts and actions vis-à-vis the external world'.[165]

The spark of the divine spirit in Gnostic literature is the link between the thinking, material human being and the forgotten, immaterial godhead – the unconscious. Therefore, matter and the body symbolize the reality of the ego, the divine spark, the 'seeds of Consciousness', and the immaterial godhead symbolize the unconscious. Where Gnostic myths see the emanation of matter out of the godhead, in Jungian terms, this expresses the arising of the ego out of the unconscious and also the dependence of the ego on the unconscious.[166] In short, the 'Pleroma' or 'Monad' symbolizes in Jungian terms the original state of wholeness, the true Self, which amounts to Weil's uncreated, supernatural aspect of the soul. It is the collective unconscious, the immaterial godhead. In the larger framework of totality and wholeness, the 'Monad' succeeds the ego and the psyche.[167] According to Jung, the goal of each individual then is to elevate the unconscious to consciousness by breaking temporally with ego-consciousness. By doing so there is the integration of unconsciousness with ego-consciousness so that the unconscious becomes conscious.[168]

4.10.4 The Link in Gnostic Psychology

To reach an understanding and a sense of meaning with the correlation between the Gnostic system and the deepening mystery of the human soul, one has to shift the perspective of thinking and conceiving Gnosticism purely as a 'mythologem' rather than as a 'psychologem'.[169] The Gnostics, in fact, believed the human being to be composed of body (flesh), soul and spirit, which by comparison between its existence and creation,

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[165] R. A. Segal, 'A Jungian Interpretation of Gnostic Myths', in *The Gnostic Jung,* 21. See also E. Neumann *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 118-20.

[166] 'The dependence of humanity on the godhead matches the dependence of the ego on the unconscious to reveal itself.' See R. A. Segal, 'A Jungian Interpretation of Gnostic Myths', 21.

[167] See M. Stein 'The Gnostic Critique, Past and Present', 44. See also ibid., 39-53.

[168] See C. G. Jung, 'Foreword to Allenby: "A Psychological Study of the Origins of Monotheism"' in *The Symbolic Life,* pp. 656-59.

[169] This is precisely one of the central difficulties why the Gnostic scholar, Robert Segal, strictly considers the nature of psychology and Gnostic soteriology as entirely incommensurable with one another: he fails, as James Hurtak illustrates, though not directly, that one becomes too concerned with the methodology of the Gnostic system as a 'mythologem' rather than a 'psychologem'. See J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries*, p. 47.

its origin is two fold: ordinary and extraordinary. The Gnostic scholar, Hans Jonas continues:

> Not only the body but also the "soul" is a product of the cosmic powers, which shaped the body in the image of the divine Primal (or Archetypal) Man and animate it with their own psychical forces: these are the appetites and passions of man [...], all of which together make up the astral soul of man, his "psyche". Through his body and his soul man is part of the world and subjected to the *heimarmene* ["tyrannical world rule resulting in the perversion of life"]. Enclosed in the soul is the spirit, or "pneuma" (called also the "spark"), a portion of the divine substance from beyond which has fallen into the world; and the Archons created man for the express purpose of keeping it captive there. In its unredeemed state the pneuma this immersed in soul and flesh is unconscious of itself, [...] asleep or intoxicated by the poison of the world: in brief, it is "ignorant". Its awakening and liberation is effected through "knowledge".[170]

From this Gnostic anthropogony, and the fact that as Hurtak says, in the cosmic drama soul and matter are hostile to each other, the human being then embodying this hostility through its body and soul 'falls into the ontological category of Matter', to become 'part matter'.[171] But if we are to keep the task of Gnostic liberation at the forefront of our minds, Hurtak wants to elucidate Gnosticism not from a purely, dualistic mythologem but from a non-dualistic psychologem. In which case, he begs the question: if matter and spirit 'are on radically disjunct ontological levels, how can they have any commerce? Most explicitly, how can Man know God; how can Man participate in the transcendent?' This is followed by the interjection that if the only important 'division is between those whose pneumatic component is [...] unaware of itself and its high duty, and those whose component is awake and active',[172] then the exchange between God and humanity is understood not by Gnostic anthropogony strictly as mythological, but in terms of an important psychological principle, 'like knows like'. This principle, says Hurtak, means that 'Man can know God precisely because his *pneumatic self* is essentially akin to God's substance of light. There is a "point of superior excellence possessed by the soul enabling it to reach out to the divine"'.[173]

Therefore, the mythological position of Achamouth is a '*metaxy*-figure standing between the cosmos and the Pleroma and maintaining simultaneous contact with both. It

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[170] H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 44.
[171] J. J. Hurtak, *Gnosticism: Mystery of Mysteries*, p. 46.
[172] Ibid., 46-7.
[173] Ibid., pp. 47-8.

is because of her contact with the upper sphere of the Pleroma that she is able to supply the Ideas of the Demiurge'.[174] What this suggests is that 'far from rejecting the world as worthless illusion, Gnosis is participating fully in the process of redeeming the *kenoma* by transforming it into the perfect image of the *pleromic* archetypes'.[175] Achamouth's mediation between the Pleroma and the Kenoma (the world) at the cosmological level resembles medieval mystical psychology and its representation of 'the soul which has two faces: "The uppermost sees God at all times; the lower looks downs and guides the sense"'.[176] This is why this Gnostic cosmic history and structure 'are introduced for ulterior motives: as psychologems or existential statements'.[177]

Having determined the meaning and significance of Gnostic psychology, the aim now is to discuss its meaning and revelation in relation to Simone Weil's metaphysics and the way in which her assessment of the human situation and conception of salvation can be broadened out into a Gnostic conception of salvation.

4.10.5 The Revelation and Meaning of Gnosis

With this discussion identifying how spiritual illumination is possible through all the levels of the Gnostic system, there is the sense in which being *metoikoi* (Alien) in this world implies that one rejects the rules and laws of this place since one is no longer under their jurisdiction, and rather affirm the love of wisdom which is our true spiritual home. But even though we are not of this world but in it, this does not suggest that we have to feel hostile to the place in which we find ourselves.[178] In other words, as Hurtak argues, this does point out against some commentaries that an opposite approach to this, an anti-ethical Gnosticism, which some Gnostic thinkers cultivate, does not suggest 'a

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[174] Ibid., p. 42.
[175] T. Freke & P. Gandy, *Jesus and the Goddess*, p. 178.
[176] Ibid., p. 48. See also J.E. Jacoby, *Across the Night* (Philosophical Library, 1958), pp. 64ff. This section by Jacoby is a clear account of psychology in this period of history. Cited also ibid., p. 79.
[177] Ibid., p. 42. Therefore, without the 'psychological balances and experiences' one would not be able to perceive in this case, the way in which these worlds through the composition of a human being are interrelated for the salvation of the individual. One would not be so inclined therefore, to adopt an immediate dualistic stance at the start of 'praxis' in Gnostic eschatology and its psychological roots.
[178] Not all Gnostics, says Hurtak, 'believed that love of wisdom excluded "faith, active with love" towards one's fellow man'. See ibid., p. 60

compromise of the wholesomeness of a "higher Gnosis"' because they on the whole cultivated an inner search for truth.[179]

In this way, the physical world is not just left to its own devices but transformed so that the spiritual powers of transformation are synthesized to 'create a totally "new Man" on the planet'.[180] With the 'new man' of Gnosticism synthesized from this world through the events of the Pleromic world, 'the "experience" of the infinite in the finite cannot but be a paradox [...]', uniting 'voidness and fullness'.[181] In a similar way to this, Hurtak affirms the nothingness and fullness of contradiction in this reality of Gnosis when he says 'to live among ordinary men and yet be alone with God, to speak profound language and yet draw the strength to live from the source or existence, from the "upper root" of the soul – that is a paradox which only the mystical devotee is able to realize in his life and which makes him the center' of its existence.[182]

Hurtak's emphasis with the way in which the Gnostic manages the unification process in its experience of contradiction is the same contradiction that Weil experiences through her attempts to hold onto the unity of her exegesis of the supernatural. The difference, however, is in the living of this supernatural in the experience of contradiction: Weil struggles to sustain the juxtaposition of the unity of her supernatural reality with her existence in the natural, physical world. This struggle is no more apparent than in her spiritual empathy, for example, with affliction and an experience of the void. I now return briefly to Weil's idea of consent in relation to Necessity in order to address the actual reality of Weil's assessment of the human condition and salvation with several correlations to Gnostic Psychology.

4.11 *Weil and Gnostic Soteriology*

Through Weil's analysis of the human situation in the world there was some concern addressed earlier with her idea of consent, personality and the responsibility of society. The result is that her pseudo-physical reality[183] is based upon a world in which the

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[179] Ibid., p. 61.
[180] Ibid., p. 54.
[181] H. Jonas, p. 285.
[182] J. J. Hurtak, p. 70.
[183] Ibid.

individual concedes to the forces of necessity through suffering and affliction such that he or she may connect with the supernatural. Thus, her notion of consent attempts to address the point that there may be a right way to suffer. This implies that Weil is concerned with *how* rather than *why* we suffer, because she struggles to conceive of God in these encounters. Moreover, the 'how' in relation to suffering presupposes a 'supernatural equilibrium' between social and individual needs in society that enables a human being to consent to suffering for salvation. But this, as I discussed earlier, does not actually deal with the real reality of contradiction and the opposing forces that human beings experience in this world. In contrast to Gnostic Psychology, for example, that illustrates the affinity between the cosmic and individual level of Gnosis through its paradox that God is unknowable, but is yet the object of a knowledge and even asks to be known,[184] her motivation for separating each particular force into several forms is governed by an obsession at finding resolutions to difficult and often irresolvable experiences concerning the oppressed and working class. This, in retrospect, means that Weil, and her assessment of the oppressed, fails to recognise the experience of contradiction of the supernatural within the natural world.

Contrasted with neo-gnosticism, her desire to overcome contradiction instead of experiencing it, which perhaps illuminates her own lack of 'prolonged and first-hand experience of affliction' for example,[185] is all the more important in attempting to deepen the understanding of whether Weil in fact came to experience the void or indeed bring her worlds together through contradictory experience. Her intentions appear to be about saving rather than illuminating the soul.

Whereas neo-gnosticism attempts to address contradiction, without attempting to transcend its configurations, in order to move towards and pass into self-realization (knowing oneself), Weil is inclined to transcend and overcome the configurations of

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[184] H. Jonas, p. 288.

[185] WFG, p. 19. See also ibid., p. 118. The term, 'Affliction' (*Malheur*) is the closest translation we have to the original in French. See WFG, pp. 63-78, and FW, pp. 151-54. 'Affliction is a marvel of divine technique. It is a simple and ingenious device to introduce into the soul of a finite creature that immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold. The finite distance, which separates God from the creature, is concentrated into a point to transfix the center of the soul. [...] The man whose soul remains orientated towards God while a nail is driven through it finds himself nailed to the very center of the universe; which is God. The soul can traverse the whole of space and time and come into the actual presence of God'. See SNL, pp. 182-83.

contradiction in order to sustain the undifferentiated reality of the supernatural, and therefore, its dualistic relation with the natural world. Through the void, Weil illustrates not just the need for nothingness (to cease to be) but also shamefulness and wretchedness. To persist with the act of loving in the void is necessary so that the supernatural comes to us, but this loving is founded upon an intense desire to be delivered from it rather than illuminated in it. Weil in other words, struggles to recognize the fullness in the emptiness of the void, (beingness in non-being, infinity in the finite) which is the most significant difference between the salvation of Gnosis and that which appears in Weil's dualistic metaphysics.

4.12 *Conclusion*

What Chapter IV has aimed to establish is how Weil's mystical theology, like with her political and social writings, runs the risk of failing to relate the supernatural to the natural world. What this chapter has also attempted to show is the degree to which her personal theology has dictated the distance and separation between the human being and God. Despair for Simone Weil, as Rush Rees argues, alludes to her unintelligible conception of and process towards salvation. Having considered all the issues at stake, the discussion returned to her assessment of the human condition and relation to contradiction discussed in chapters III and early sections of chapter IV. For Weil, the human condition, which describes the tension and conflict of the human being living in the material world, elucidates the state of her own inner life.[186] Yet, the price of such darkness – the void – is that Weil exposes her entire sense of being to the world so that the reality of her inner life disappears into nothingness. Sensing that one is simply nothing explains why 'the other' – the oppressed and the supernatural outside of her – was everything.

Thus, the conclusion of Weil's dilemma, which I explore further at the end of this thesis, is that the inner life is not meant to be exposed. 'Just as the inner life of organs is necessary for the survival of the body, so an inner life is vitally necessary to nourish and

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[186] H. Arendt, *Thinking*, vol. 1, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 31.

support human activity'.[187] In other words, the exposure of her inner life sets up her dilemma – it puts it in direct tension with the world. Weil's life testifies to this; she *reacts* to, rather than *acts* in, the world. In view of what Gillian Rose once remarked as Weil's supernatural failing to embody her own true nature,[188] one is led to another issue raised by the German thinker, Hannah Arendt. She says that the idea of the Good is not able to establish lasting institutions because it destroys the plurality necessary in our living reality.[189] It destroys, in other words, the tension of contradiction that enables us to reach what Weil recognizes as the 'other reality'. Goodness that is absolute and supreme is an inner state and experience of the soul which actively mediates to each and every individual *indirectly* the ability and capacity of the individual to *directly* engage in life, that is to say, by the way in which we actively appear to others in public life.[190] Therefore, Arendt's argument, by implications, shows how the power of Goodness from the inner life needs to pass unnoticed in order for it to be noticed through the way we are in relation to others. What is interesting to see is how Gustav Thibon once remarked that Weil struggled to pass unnoticed even in the most elementary of human practices.

The investigation parts from Weil for a while, though she will resurface through key assessments of the life and work of Gillian Rose and in the final chapter on the genesis of the search for salvation. Instead, the discussion turns to another remarkable thinker who equally makes a choice of how to live with and in contradiction. Gillian Rose, like Arendt, loves neither horn of a dilemma.[191] The tenets of Rose's work explore ways in which thinking takes a line in equal distance from two sides of the dilemma. In this way, she gives herself the freedom to venture outside of time but at the same time to remain rooted in the present, at the intersection between the two sides of contradiction.[192]

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[187] Ibid., p. 145.
[188] JM, p. 211.
[189] H. Arendt, *On Evolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), pp. 79-80.
[190] For example, through compromise, negotiation, and forgiveness. See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 180-84.
[191] From Hegel [Rose] took both an underlying philosophy and an absolutely rigorous, and intellectually and politically ruthless engagement with the contradictions of modernity. [...] Like Hannah Arendt, with whom in many ways she can be compared, she is likely to acquire an increasingly diversified and ramified reputation, spanning the increasingly interrelated fields of philosophical, social and cultural theory. See L. Marcus, 'The Work of Gillian Rose: An Introduction', *Women: A Cultural Review*, (1998), pp. 1-2.
[192] I take this principle from Arendt whereby she describes the result of how tradition that becomes meaningless is something that makes thinking necessary. Furthermore, with tradition, she describes how the past and future put us into struggle, and she uses Kafka's parable of thought to show that, contrary to

This intersection constitutes Rose's idea of the 'broken middle' which leads her into thinking about modernity and post-modernity, bourgeois social relations, sociological structures and the soteriology and theology of contradiction. From this brief introduction, I now turn from Simone Weil to the life and work of Gillian Rose.

Kafka, one does not necessarily need to become a victim of this struggle through either death in exhaustion and despair or leaping into a false, metaphysical realities that set themselves apart from human experience. See H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), pp. 8-16.

PART III

Prelude: 'Gillian Rose and the Broken Middle'

The phrase, 'keep your mind in hell, and despair not' on the opening page of her book, *Love's Work,* highlights the challenge of the broken middle. Further, it is indicative of Rose's existential commitment to the whole self, that is, she never perceived philosophy to be too abstract in the sense that one could not have some kind of existential relation of the self to it. Though I have to some extent, discussed this in relation to Weil, it will nevertheless provide a different perspective on her in the wake of Rose because this dynamic becomes the central theme of Rose's book. Her idea of how to live a human life constituted her desire to live according to the inevitabilities of reality. For example, she never attempted to 'demonise' her cancer[1] but instead faced the difficulties that were present to her. For Rose, life is about responsibility which required work rather than evasion, and her thought rooted in 'Hegelian Idealism' is more evident than anywhere else in her own autobiography. *Love's Work* is primarily 'A new allegory of Love',[2] a small miracle of how to face life with all its consequences, dilemmas, dichotomies and conflicts. I intend to explore this reality – how Rose lived her own philosophy – in the last section of this thesis.

Gillian Rose, unlike Simone Weil, was shown in Chapter III to avoid escaping into a metaphysical world through her negotiations of friendship. In the discussion, abstract notions were used to reconstruct human affairs and the salvation of the human being. Rose avoids rejecting her body, femininity, indeed her very nature, and instead, embarks on a passionate re-evaluation of the limitations of traditions, which conceive the world as a dualism. Without duality in the way, Rose fosters in herself an inner sense of responsibility in which we see these limitations in their various forms with a view to transcending them, so that we ceaselessly embrace and accept contradiction in our lives.

As Chapter I outlined, Rose's broken middle is a philosophical idea that operates within a schematic of oppositions and contradictions. The term is dialectical. Like the

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[1] J. M. Bernstein, 'A Work of Hard Love', *The Guardian*, 11 December 1995, p. 12.
[2] Marina Warner, 'Fierceness', review of *Love's Work* (London: Vintage, 1995), by Gillian Rose.

void, the broken middle is a *type* of contradiction, that is, a contradiction of ideas that serves as the determining factor in their interaction, and aims to identify the relevance of the integrity and brokenness of the whole life. Rose's philosophy on friendship, for example, drives this point home. To be a friend to someone, says Rose, is a give and take situation in which we must be willing to acknowledge in friendship 'difference and identity, togetherness and separation, understanding and misunderstanding'.[3] When there is a 'crisis of friendship' there comes about a changed relationship to oneself as well as to one's friend. The broken middle is this 'crisis of friendship' as self-change and mutual change. If we were to dismiss the broken middle and give up all friendship we would, as Rose puts it, also cease to be a friend to oneself.[4]

Like with friendship, Rose's broken middle is a universal mirror that reflects the contradictions of human life and its illusions. Like with friendship, it also works in a similar way to Simone Weil's 'void'. Both attempt to draw attention to the human being working with the finite/visible and infinite/invisible. Yet, the broken middle appears to have a wider field of application than the void, in the sense that it has a double function of relating not just the contradiction of the individual in relation to itself, but also the contradiction of the individual in relation to the 'other'.

Our relation to it makes it a living spirituality, a self-reflective, 'mirroring principle' of ourselves in active experience. A person's ability to love and act through it in an experience of it measure and expand our understanding of who and what we are. This, in a nutshell, is the objective of Rose's broken middle. The principle avoids any attempt to override any unforeseen and unpredictable set of oppositions and contradictions within it. Rather, it keeps at the forefront of experience the precept that the only thing one knows is that one does not know anything.[5] By presupposing this precept one is less inclined to resolve difficulties at a collective and/or individual level of consciousness but rather, risk their implications, even negatively, in order to learn from it. In other words, we bring into some sort of balance our overrun desire to 'conceptually influence' our sense of experience of contradiction. The outcome to be rendered is that we establish through this relation between concept and experience, a set of preconditions

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[3] JM, p. 2.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Plato, *Apology*, 21d5.

which do not enable the nature of contradictory experience to influence us. Rather, we influence it instead. The result is that we exist and live with a sense of confusion – a dilemma in us between what we ought to be and do according to abstract principles or ideals (universals) and what we are in our active participation in experience of life (particular). In other words, Rose's idea brings to the surface problems to do with the relation between the universal and particular.

Rose begins to explore this in her book, *Hegel Contra Sociology*. As we recall, this text announces itself as 'an attempt to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory'.[6] What lies behind this retrieval is her concern that modernity, based upon the belief of progress and the power of human reason to produce human freedom, has been misunderstood and misrepresented. Precisely, reason from modernity has attempted to conquer the world, but has along the way been understood to represent, within the development of social theory, a distinct separation between theory and practice. For Rose, this could not be further from the truth, which is why she attempts to revive the difficulties of reason, through experience, in order to illustrate the failings of modern social thinking. In that case, *Hegel Contra Sociology* is an exegesis of the failure of sociology to recognise its dualistic adaptations of 'neo-Kantian paradigms' (and its illusions) to sociological justifications for social theory and practice. This re-evaluation of social theory is Rose's intention to avoid the trap of dualistic thinking, and instead, revive Hegelian speculative thought, that is, 'self-aware thinking'[7] (the relation between certainty and its negation or the self-relation of relation and non-relation) in order to reconstruct social theory and retrieve such thought in experience.

In retrospect, Rose's system attempts to illustrate the point that no truth about the absolute or middle can be contained in any one moment or in one statement because it must be experienced.[8] Her preoccupation with dualistic thought, that is, divisions within religious, social and political frameworks, is such as to argue that such separations have been presupposed rather than understood as socially and historically preconditioned (bourgeois social relations). In retrospect, presuppositions determine the way in which

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[6] HCS, p. 1.
[7] R. D. Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose', *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), p. 10.
[8] HCS, p. 182.

modernity came to reflect upon itself: that 'the autonomous moral subject [is] free within the order of representations [the assumption of a reality which is independent of language and thought] but unfree within its preconditions and outcomes. Modernity is also 'the working out of that combination'.[9] The implications of this view generate the drive behind Rose's preoccupation with the contradictions and aporias of sociology and social theory.

However, her systematic, speculative re-evaluations are primarily associated with an earlier period of philosophy – the Enlightenment – particularly the dualisms of the philosophy of Kant. Kantian philosophy emerges into modernity as a predicament in and through social theory and its habits of repeating the dualistic problem in order to overcome Kantian dichotomies. But modernity's dilemma is not just an enquiry into the way we think and act dualistically, but the way in which the idea of reason is fabricated to account for these dualistic adaptations. For example, Kant uses theoretical reason, which Rose considers to be 'self-limiting', in order to establish a categorical imperative that asserts a moral law, independent of subjective disposition, and one in which a person therefore obeys irrespective of nature and circumstances. But the result of this act for autonomy and freedom presupposes the idea that reason subordinates its Others – whatever is dangerous to reason and therefore suppressed by reason[10] – acting exclusively and against legality (the heteronomous, social realm). 'Kant's notion of moral autonomy is formal, not only because it excludes natural desire, [...] but because it classifies legality, the social realm with the heteronomous hindrances to the formation of a free will'.[11] It is no wonder that Rose suggests 'dualistic consciousness' as a determining factor in universal, formal law.[12] All in all, therefore, this makes the law transcendental, that is, necessary (we are to obey it) but unknowable in it-self (the categorical imperative determined by pure, theoretical reason). The result, however, is contradictory. Universality and (personal) necessity cannot combine because 'the universal will is opposed to (personal) necessity or formal legality'.[13]

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[9] MBL, pp. 57-8.
[10] JM, p. 3.
[11] HCS, p. 54.
[12] Ibid., p. 164.
[13] N. Tubbs, 'Mind the Gap: The Philosophy of Gillian Rose', *Thesis Eleven* 60 (2000), p. 43.

Rose, in contrast to the duality of reason, wishes to revive the Other in order to give it voice and visibility, but in doing so, *contra*-Kantian reason, she intends also to re-conceive reason in such a way that it speculatively negotiates 'its self-identity and lack of self-identity' through what she considers the philosophical importance of error and being familiar with error. 'To recognise misperception is to learn; to learn is to [...] re-conceive the self'.[14] In doing so, Rose is able to refer to modernity's ancient predicament – the diremption (division)[15] between law and ethics, its inability to promote a way in which to live in and through finitude in contradictory experience. Moreover, Rose intends to revive reason in post-modernity, which, by attempting to fall into a similar predicament as modernity, denounces reason and instead exalts its abused Other in a fixed and exclusive manner. The 'Other' in postmodern ethics, for example,

> is misrepresented as sheer alterity, for "the Other" is equally the distraught subject searching for its substance, its ethical life. [...] *New ethics* would *transcend* the autonomy of the subject by commanding that I substitute myself for "the Other" (heteronomy) or by commending attention to "the Other". Yet it is inveterate but occluded *immanence* of one subject to itself and to other subjects that needs further exposition. Simply to command me to sacrifice myself, or to commend that I pay attention to others makes me intolerant, naïve and miserable. [...] [T]he immanence of the self-relation of "the Other" to my own self-relation will always be disowned.[16]

Through modernity's predicament we can extrapolate Rose's (indirect) illustration of Weil's human condition, that is, her obsession with and self-sacrifice towards 'others'. Weil might have detached herself conceptually from illusion in this world, but one observes her deep, somewhat obsessive, sacrificial attachments to the suffering of humanity.[17] Whilst this is discussed in earlier chapters and will be brought to conclusion later in the context of the genesis of the search for salvation, Rose attempts to illustrate here the predicament of modernity or post-modernity resting upon the dualisms of Kantian philosophy. With Rose's speculative evaluations of sociological critique, I begin therefore, in Chapter V with an investigation into Hegel's critique of Kant, and later Fichte with Hegel's philosophical ally, Schelling. In short, Hegel presents their

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[14] R. D. Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose', p. 9.
[15] The term, 'diremption' according to Rose, 'draws attention to the trauma of separation of that which was [...] *not* originally united'. See TBM, p. 236.
[16] JM, p. 8.
[17] See Chapters III & IV.

philosophies on the basis that both Kant and Fichte hold to the idea that thought and reality is irreversibly divided. They are, however, dissatisfied with this division and set about in their respective systems of thought to overcome it.[18]

In this case, and bearing in mind Kant's unsuccessful attempts to resolve this division, I reflect upon their philosophies in relation to the 'Transcendental Deduction' debate: a proof that legitimises the possibility of experience transcendentally. This reflection illustrates not only how Rose employs the notion of 'contradiction and opposition' in her work, but how the 'Kantian critique' is instrumental to the way Hegel's notion of speculative thought unfolds into the themes I have briefly mentioned above. A speculative proposition affirms the identity and non-identity between the subject and predicate of a proposition, Rose's 'broken middle', which ends up as a progressive process of speculative thinking from her study of the dialect of Theodor Adorno, (see Rose, *The Melancholy of Science: An Introduction to the thought of Theodor W. Adorno*), to Hegel's speculative experience in her book, *Hegel Contra Sociology.*

Chapter VI looks at the early developments of the 'broken middle', (introduced above in brief), which eventually emerges into a more cohesive, 'systematic' framework in chapter VII. In short, the broken middle is a philosophical idea that contains oppositions and contradictions, which function both on a collective and individual level of consciousness. The phenomenology of the broken middle is the centre of Rose's 'universe', and consists of two interconnected facets of cognition. Firstly, thought connects with reality in the broken middle as a philosophical idea that is impersonal and collective, (*Hegel Contra Sociology, The Broken Middle,* and *Judaism and Modernity*). Secondly, the collective is then apprehended in the experience of the broken middle as a way of life, which Rose characterises by human struggling and failing (*Judaism and Modernity* and *Mourning Becomes the Law*). However, this failing and struggle within institutions and societies is gradually re-assessed in terms of a person's direct relation to experience in the broken middle that provokes an existential commitment of the self to living. It is not just the individual (in the collective) that hosts the broken middle, but Rose who hosts her *life* in the broken middle (*Love's Work* and *Paradiso*). Her

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[18] For an example of this, see B. Longuenesse, 'Point of View of Man or Knowledge of God: Kant and Hegel on Concept, Judgment and Reason', in S. Sedgwick (ed.), *The Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 255-58.

commitment to be in the first person singular, to be changed in her points of view, attitudes and convictions is her direct encounters with contradictory experience.

As with Simone Weil, Rose encounters a movement of spirituality that occurs through the meandering of her thought and experience, though it becomes apparent that Weil, rather than Rose, is tempted to escape from brokenness/contradiction. A continually deepening journey of self-realisation, Rose's broken middle begins as a theory for collective recognition of error that gradually emerges into a personal testimony of salvation explored in its pathos in *Love's Work* through 'the very *protestantism* against modernity [which] fuels our [and her] inner self-relation'.[19] Here, uncertainty with life is fuelled with the same driven passion for Rose to entertain the possibility of knowing the absolute through an awareness of the broken middle that is already active and present. Love, in this context, has no beginning or end but is a *presence* which has to be 'worked.' The tension of contradiction in other words is in the 'work' which is love that is present, active and energetic. She drives this work of love to find the unity of her thought and experience – the broken middle 'roaring and roasting',[20] for the sake of that moment when the 'I' reaches into the depths of its own uncertainty to become certain of itself (beyond limitation) in salvation.

These issues and their background are discussed thoroughly but progressively over several chapters on Rose's thinking towards and within her notion of the broken middle. Chapter VI then illustrates the way in which Rose goes about retrieving speculative thought and experience.[21] Her retrieval helps to appreciate Hegel's speculative 'identity and non-identity in the crafts of his work'.[22] In addition, it establishes the genesis of the broken middle, which paves the way for examining Rose's philosophical thoughts, bounded by the reality of the 'broken middle, in chapter VII. They begin philosophically with one of her most prominent, but difficult texts, *The Broken Middle*. This impersonal, philosophical idea, born from speculative experience, is central to her determination to 'retrieve the experience of contradiction as the substance of life, and to manifest the actuality of *protest*', (to speak against the 'other' is already to

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[19] LW, pp. 126-7.
[20] Ibid., p. 68.
[21] See for example, JM, p. 27.
[22] Ibid., p. 61 & POS, § 17.

be part of the 'other').[23] The art of protest is initially formed within the configurations of 'anxiety of beginning', the 'agon of authorship' and the 'equivocation of the ethical'.[24] Each works towards the restoration of the *pathos* of the concept to its *logos*, that is, to urge one to comprehend diremption in all its anxiety and equivocation so that we 'know, misknow and yet, grow'.[25] The idea here that truth requires loss is determined by the precept that he who remains faithful to the logos risks losing his life. It brings forth a person's own contradictory self-relation, his or her own dilemma in the broken middle in order to pass through it and become what one really is. I will provide a full discussion of specific areas that invigorate the philosophical idea of the 'broken middle', particularly in connection to Kierkegaard on the diremption of law and ethics, and Rose' reflections on the risks of critical rationality and of political action through the lives of Rahel Varnhagen and Hannah Arendt.

With a gradual emerging of a personal, autobiographical account from collectivity, Rose's 'broken middle' has announced 'that life must be risked in order to be gained; that only by discovering the limit of life – death – is "life" itself discovered'.[26] The risk is the gap in the duality of subject and object – the experiences of dualism, which Rose is asking us to recognise and guard against those who would close it by forcing their own resolution of its dilemma either politically ('new ethics' in post-modernism), theoretically (Kantian reason) or theologically (the Protestant Ethic).[27] This recognition undergoes development with my presentation of Rose's 'broken middle, and then in the last chapter, the search for salvation *through* the broken middle. In the meantime, given that we assess the duality that presupposes theoretical resolutions in Kantian and Fichtean philosophy in the chapter to come, this chapter on Rose's broken middle includes a discussion of the radical orthodox theologian, John Milbank, and his thoughts on post-modern theology. In short, his theology attempts to overcome

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[23] N. Tubbs, 'What is Love's Work?' p. 34.
[24] See TBM, pp. 308-310.
[25] Ibid., p. 310.
[26] Ibid., p. 16.
[27] Nigel Tubbs illustrates the gap as the broken middle in his essay, 'Mind the Gap: The Philosophy of Gillian Rose', which he asks us to be mindful of, that is, be 'resigned to the necessity of the gap as dichotomy and separation', but also, 'be on guard against the dangers of the gap itself. From the gap between subject and object, there shines out a powerful illusion of division, separation and ultimately of irreconcilability'. See ibid., pp. 56-7.

modernity's failings, whilst not realising that its resolutions of modernity's predicament is repeated with what Rose calls 'holy middles' – false reconciliations that attempt to establish peace beyond time. These false resolutions, which attempt to mend the broken middle, reside within the rhetoric of universal Christian *agape*, which discussions develop further on the Protestant Ethic. This ethic itself beyond time cultivates, unintentionally, an inwardness and 'worldly asceticism' that is represented by the image of 'the beautiful soul' – a woman who eschews the middle, broken, and mourns a world she cannot and will not join.

The conclusions of this chapter identify the second recognition, which is the search for salvation through the 'broken middle'. In *Mourning Becomes the Law*, Rose extracts this search from the despair she recognises in post-modernism and its 'despairing rationalism without reason'.[28] Here, post-modernity's system of thought divorces metaphysics and ethics, and renounces 'reason, power and truth'.[29] But repeating these philosophical forms by upholding their 'formerly degraded "others"' they are equally 'held in a transcendence far off the ground [but] without reason and in despair'.[30] Rose overturns this 'endless mourning' of post-modernity, that is to say, its endless despairing of reason, only to lament in the title of her book: mourning becomes the law – it returns to reason when reason itself is reassessed in such a way that it can complete its mourning.[31]

The reinvigoration of reason based not on its abandonment (which post-modern thought advocates but which Rose conceives as incoherent in relation to its 'new ethics' and ironic philosophy),[32] but on the success of reason that has failed as a result of the 'degraded power (Athens: reason, political rationality) and exalted ethics, (Jerusalem: revelation; seeking to dedicate themselves to difference, to otherness, to love – to a new

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[28] MBL, p. 7.
[29] This is because they legitimise forms of domination which 'have destroyed or suppressed their "others" in the name of universal interest'. See ibid., p. 2.
[30] Ibid., p. 7.
[31] Complete mourning 'acknowledges the creative involvement of action in the configuration of power and law', avoiding any fixed, closed conceptual structures with which Rose finds in post-modernism. See ibid., p. 12.
[32] The philosophy of post-modernity is labelled ironic, 'the celebration of the sheer promiscuity of all intellectual endeavour, because it depends upon the opposition of any philosophical position which presupposes an independent reality 'to which its conceptuality aims to be in some sense adequate'. See ibid., p. 6.

ethics)'.[33] This reinvigoration which is part of the genesis of the search for salvation in the last chapter works not to eliminate the 'broken middle', but to *accept* it, and Rose intends to find salvation from this despair. Not just reason, but the absolute is equally subject to the broken middle for salvation. The absolute is faced with a contradiction between knowing it and yet failing to think it.[34] The latter illustrates ambivalence in the sense that, like reason, it is not intended to provide consciousness with solutions, but with deepening our understanding of the issues at stake. This amounts to Rose's retrieval of its spiritual nature, by not adding or imposing something, but revealing what is present but hidden in ambivalence.[35] Therefore, finding a sense of ambivalence with certainty, (in the absolute) which speculative experience suggests, is Rose's move towards salvation. Ambivalence (speculatively speaking) is to know illusion (recognising error) in the broken middle, but not to prejudge or dominate abstractly recognisable error – rather to learn about it positively through negative experiences that imply it.

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[33] Ibid., pp. 20-31.
[34] HCS, p. 204.
[35] N. Tubbs, 'Mind the Gap: The Philosophy of Gillian Rose', p. 54.