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## UNDERSTANDING SIMONE WEIL'S "SCIENCE OF THE SUPERNATURAL" WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RATIONALISM

### Abstract

*In her oeuvre, Simone Weil focused on that "other reality," as she termed it, situated outside space and time, otherwise called the supernatural. Though it is inaccessible to human faculties, it is, paradoxically, essential to an accurate anthropology, central to the just constitution of a state, and, indeed, key to the accurate perception of reality. But how can the twain meet? And how can its existence be proven philosophically and scientifically, when it is not empirically verifiable and appears to be experienced only by a select few? Weil suggests a number of approaches demanding a rethinking of positivist tenets. She shows how the supernatural or grace changes the relationship of forces (such as power and necessity) that rule the world. Like nature, the supernatural has its own laws which Weil traces in a philosophical "science of the supernatural," seeing in Plato's allegory of the cave an image of its action on the soul. It is the Archimedean point from which the world can be lifted out of its hinges, when it would otherwise submit to evil as necessarily as a stone obeying the law of gravity. It is an element that cannot be left out of the mathematical equation of the world, since it lies at its very center.*

Given the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, empiricism and the *laïcité* on which *la République* prides itself, one might be surprised that a non-Christian French philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century analyzes the supernatural from a philosophical perspective<sup>1</sup>. Despite an education in the tradition of rationalism, Simone Weil (1909-43) does precisely that – unfalteringly and unapologetically<sup>2</sup>. Her point is that the supernatural is not merely a

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<sup>1</sup> However, the Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel had written about the supernatural and Henri de Lubac brought it back to the forefront of Catholic theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But as P. DAVID points out in *L'absolu peut-il faire l'objet d'une science expérimentale?* (in "Cahiers Simone Weil", 35 (1/2012), pp. 29-87, in particular p. 30), philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas, Henry, Marion, the later Jacques Derrida, Louis Lavelle and Gabriel Marcel (as well as Blondel and Jacques Maritain), analyze phenomena that reveal the absolute, while Simone Weil turns her investigation of the supernatural into an experimental *science* in its own right. Weil is only in terms of her background non-Christian, having been brought up in a Jewish agnostic family, and having adopted agnosticism herself in her teens, as she later explains in her famous autobiographical letter to Father Perrin from May 1942 (S. WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, Fayard, Paris 1966, pp. 36-37). Yet even in her teens, her understanding of life and of some key-virtues was Christian (*ibidem*, p. 40). She states she had always been Catholic in a sense, in terms of her values and virtues, at least by right if not in fact (*ibidem*, p. 53).

<sup>2</sup> See A.-A. DEVAUX, *Raison et mystère chez Simone Weil*, in M. CAILLE-E. GRUBER (eds.), *Simone Weil: La passion de la raison*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2003, pp. 181-189, in particular p. 181 (quoted in J.M. PACHECO

religious topic, reserved to theologians, but a reality of universal importance for believers and non-believers alike, while being at the center of every authentic religion, whatever its particular creed. More than that, it has its own scientific laws, more certain and immutable than the laws of nature. The supernatural is so essential that she places it at the center of her reflections during her work for the Free French in London in 1942-43. To her, it is essential to philosophy. Yet, one might ask how something so elusive can become an object of philosophic enquiry. I intend to show that Weil's attempt is convincing in this day and age, as well as her analysis of the supernatural's features, its impact and its significance.

### 1. *A Preliminary Clarification*

Though the supernatural and grace cover more or less the same reality in Weil's thought, they emphasize different aspects and also have different connotations<sup>3</sup>. The supernatural refers to the sphere of the absolute good, as shall be shown, while grace is its manifestation in this world, counteracting *pesanteur*, the moral law of gravity<sup>4</sup>. The supernatural shall be the focus of this article, rather than grace (brought perhaps wrongly to such prominence through Gustave Thibon's choice of *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* as title to his selection of quotes from Weil's notebooks). For Weil attempts to prove its existence in multiple ways which she does not to the same degree, when it comes to grace. As a response to rationalism, her thoughts on the supernatural are therefore more pertinent.

### 2. *That Other Reality*

Her *Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations* is the preamble to *L'Enracinement*, an unfinished book she had written for the Free French in England, supposed to provide the basis for a new constitution and government in post-war France<sup>5</sup>. She refers to the

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GONÇALVES, *Le mystère du surnaturel: Simone Weil et Henri de Lubac*, in "Cahiers Simone Weil", 35 (2/2012), pp. 233-254, in particular p. 246).

<sup>3</sup> See also P. DAVID, *L'absolu peut-il faire l'objet d'une science expérimentale?*, pp. 30-31. Weil referred to the term "supernatural" for the first time in her third notebook in 1941 according to Pascal David (see *ibidem*, p. 34), and shortly before to "grace" in her article on the *Iliad* published December 1940 and January 1941 (S. WEIL, *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*, in EAD., *Œuvres complètes [= OC]*, vol. II. 3: *Écrits historiques et politiques: vers la guerre (1937-1940)*, ed. by S. Fraisse, Gallimard, Paris 1989, pp. 227-253).

<sup>4</sup> Weil often spoke of "grace" (or of supernatural, spiritual or transcendent "energy") at the same time as "*pesanteur*", the first descending to lift one up while the second pulls one down. But "grace" remained part of her vocabulary even when she hardly referred to "*pesanteur*" anymore, preferring the terms of "*force*" and "*necessity*". See G. KAHN, *Les notions de pesanteur et d'énergie chez Simone Weil*, in "Cahiers Simone Weil", 9 (1/1986), pp. 22-31, in particular p. 22 and S. WEIL, *A propos du Pater*, in *OC IV.1: Écrits de Marseille (1940-42)*, ed. by R. Chenavier et al., Gallimard, Paris 2008, pp. 337-345, in particular p. 341.

<sup>5</sup> See J. CABAUD, *Simone Weil à Londres*, in "Cahiers Simone Weil", 16 (4/1993), pp. 275-311, in particular p. 296.

supernatural already in her first sentence, but in veiled terms, calling it “this other reality” thereby hoping to reach a wider audience: “there is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties”<sup>6</sup>. Weil holds on staunchly to the independent existence of this “other reality”, shying away from calling it the “supernatural” in her draft, probably to preempt confusion (with the eerie, wondersome and demonic), or prevent the rationalists’ prejudices from rearing their ugly head. But this is the only way she caters to the modern mind’s skepticism *vis-à-vis* its existence. Otherwise, she simply expects her readers to do justice to the complexity and paradoxes of reality, rather than cutting them down in a Procrustean fashion to suit their expectations and protect their comfort-zone<sup>7</sup>.

She does not pretend that this other reality is easily accessible. Instead, one may wonder how to be cognizant about it at all let alone analyze it philosophically, if it is beyond human beings’ faculties, their mental universe, space and time and the world itself. In her notebooks, she therefore writes about the necessity of an indirect approach: “The supernatural is the light. One should not dare to turn it into an object for fear of lowering it”<sup>8</sup>. Yet, this does not absolve one from scientific rigor without which the social sciences would become impossible, as she writes in *L’Enracinement*<sup>9</sup>. Whether she can meet the high aim she has set herself, is a different question.

### 3. *An Existential Proof of the Supernatural as the Good*

Anthropology yields such an indirect path to the supernatural, for something within the human person points to this reality, even calls for it. For there is this need for an absolute good which is “at the centre of the human heart”, defining human experience, as Weil writes in her draft. One can assume that human beings, when not in total despair, long for something better in life, for fulfillment, even if incapable of putting a name to it. They might, Wordsworthlike, turn to their youth, thinking the happiness they experienced there, is to be found in its innocence. Like the Romantics, they might try to look nostalgically for the “blue flower” of utter fulfillment. Or, they might erroneously believe to find it in their work, friends, passionate love *et al.* Philosophers like Augustine

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<sup>6</sup> S. WEIL, *Selected Essays 1934-43*, ed. and trans. by R. Rees, Oxford University Press, London 1962, pp. 219-227, in particular p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> For her understanding of philosophy, see OC IV.4: *Cahiers (juillet 1942-juillet 1943): La connaissance surnaturelle (Cahiers de New York et de Londres)*, ed. by M.-A. Fourneyron *et al.*, Gallimard, Paris 2006, p. 362.

<sup>8</sup> OC VI.2: *Cahiers (septembre 1941-février 1942)*, ed. by A. Degrâces *et al.*, Gallimard, Paris 1997, p. 245. All translations from the French are my own, unless otherwise indicated. As ROBERT CHENAVIER writes in *Les usages du surnaturel chez Simone Weil* (in “Cahiers Simone Weil”, 34 (4/2011), pp. 385-394, in particular p. 389): “Like light, the supernatural renders visible; it is neither visible nor sayable if one separates it from its real manifestation in the world.”

<sup>9</sup> See OC V.2: *Écrits de New York et de Londres (1943): L’Enracinement*, ed. by R. Chenavier and P. Rolland, Gallimard, Paris 2013, p. 358.

and Blaise Pascal have written about this phenomenon, pointing out that only something absolute can satisfy this infinite longing<sup>10</sup>.

They, like Weil, draw on an existential argument that starts with the basic human experience of an infinite longing fraught with frustration. For if honest, the subject will come to realize that no finite being, no work, art, honor, power, spouse or lover will give the complete fulfillment he is seeking; that disappointment follows upon disappointment, despite success, health, a happy marriage, power and money. Yet, realizing this is so daunting and terrifying, it means such a painful death to human strivings, that he might well prefer to continue pursuing these red herrings<sup>11</sup>. Thus, as Pascal says, people spend their life in pursuit of vanities, holding them up like a shield, thereby blocking the view to the abyss everybody is running toward, namely death<sup>12</sup>. Yet, courageously facing the painful truth that nothing in this world can assuage this existential thirst means the beginning of a journey that will, if one persists, lead to an encounter with that other world<sup>13</sup>.

Weil merely points to this existential proof in this context before speaking of alternative ways of perceiving the supernatural: only something absolutely good can satisfy the human heart, as experience teaches, and the pure good is that “other reality” or the supernatural<sup>14</sup>. Its main feature is therefore not of being outside this world, as its name misleads one to think, but that it is of intrinsic value, unconditionally good in all respects, for all times and in all places, independently of an individual’s interests, culture and beliefs. The latter might make it challenging for him to realize its existence, and he might even reject it, but that doesn’t change the fact that it is good independently of his acceptance.

#### 4. *The Absolute Good is Known through the Heart*

What makes the perception of the absolute good difficult is that it cannot enter this world in its pure, stainless state through mere human effort – not because it cannot

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<sup>10</sup> Because, as she writes in *Human Personality* (in S. WEIL, *Selected Essays 1934-43*, pp. 9-34), there is something “sacred in every human being”, making him expect “in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him” (*ibidem*, p. 10). It is this orientation towards the good that defines human beings and constitutes their dignity according to Weil.

<sup>11</sup> S. WEIL, *Formes de l’amour implicite de Dieu*, in OC IV.1, pp. 285-336, in particular p. 285-6; EAD., *Réflexions sans ordre sur l’amour de Dieu*, in OC IV.1, pp. 272-9, in particular p. 277.

<sup>12</sup> B. PASCAL, *Pensées*, in ID., *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Jacques Chevalier, Gallimard/La Pléiade, Paris 1954, No. 226.

<sup>13</sup> But is the belief in the supernatural then not simply a form of escapism, making the thought of death bearable? Weil is scrupulously aware of this danger. Yet, the absolute good demands an adherence for its own sake, with no promise of happiness in this world or in the other for that matter. Seeking it demands death to self and does not remove the experience of suffering as drugs would. Furthermore, Weil was skeptical of the idea of a personal resurrection. She even spoke of the necessity of a “purifying atheism”, stripping the self of its idols in order to seek the good for itself.

<sup>14</sup> Since the good is something *sui generis*, of its own right, it cannot be proven by anything other than pointing to it, showing the way it manifests itself to human beings, and by delineating its features. It can be brought to relief, while trying to reduce it to something else means distorting its nature.

penetrate reality, but because human beings tend to live in a world of shadows. Though it cannot be forced to reveal itself, there are certain laws that, if obeyed, will assure its manifestation – though in its own time. For if a person directs all her attention and love towards it, as Weil states in her draft, she will eventually perceive it. Indeed, success is assured to every individual doing so. The good will firstly “descend upon him” in the form of grace and secondly shine “through him upon all that surrounds him”<sup>15</sup>. Between the longing of the human heart and its capacity to focus with loving attention on it – even if doubtful of its existence – everybody can be assured to experience the supernatural.

Weil does not propose an experiment that can be reproduced in a lab nor one accessible to the senses, but subject to laws just as, if not more, rigorous than the laws of nature. If certain conditions are met (intense longing and loving attention), then this other reality will make itself known<sup>16</sup>. However, this will not happen primarily through perception or reason (though they can confirm it) but through the heart, of which Pascal already said that it “has its reasons which reason does not know”<sup>17</sup>.

This is not a Romantic notion, an irrational excuse when hard facts are missing, but the recognition of different kinds of perception appropriate to other modes of reality. This, of course, goes directly against the precepts of rationalism, empiricism, positivism etc. as Weil was well aware. But it is precisely because of her rigorous and scientific bend that she believes science demands an openness to all of reality, not only that which happens to fit certain kind of criteria. She is not alone in this, as realist phenomenologists like Max Scheler, Dietrich von Hildebrand and Edith Stein have shown. They have analyzed how the heart gives access, for example, to realities central to human life and happiness<sup>18</sup>. What sufferings and emotions the other person is experiencing cannot be known closely and intimately any other way. Though these perceptions rely on being expressed in manners accessible to the senses and reason like words, a sorrowful look or a loving touch, they cannot be reduced to these. Another person cannot be known in any profound way, from the inside, without the heart coming into play. Some persons are easier to “read”, due to family bonds or similarities. Others will remain a closed book, if they hide their true character or if not looked at through the lens of love<sup>19</sup>. Why this mode of perception should, *par excellence*, apply also to this “other reality” will soon become clearer.

<sup>15</sup> S. WEIL, *Selected Essays 1934-43*, p. 220.

<sup>16</sup> OC VI.2, pp. 236 and 360; OC VI.3, pp. 119-20; OC V.2, p. 328. Though intelligence “cannot control the mystery itself”, it can control “the ways that lead to the mystery [...]” (OC VI.4, p. 174).

<sup>17</sup> B. PASCAL, *Pensées*, No. 477. I am somewhat bending Pascal’s meaning here, since he was talking about *l’esprit de finesse* in contrast to *l’esprit de géométrie*, rather than thinking of knowledge obtained through love or empathy (see H. ISHIGURO, *Myths and False Dichotomies*, in “Social Research”, 52 (2/1985), pp. 363-381, in particular p. 370).

<sup>18</sup> See M. SCHELER, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, Francke Verlag, Bern 1966, pp. 386-389. Mentioned by J.F. CROSBY, *On Empathy*, in “Fides Quaerens Intellectum”, II (1/2002), pp. 23-53, in particular p. 29. See also E. STEIN, *On the Problem of Empathy*, Engl. transl. W. Stein, in EAD., *Collected Works*, vol. 3, ICS, Washington DC 1989<sup>3</sup> and D. VON HILDEBRAND, *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity*, Engl. transl. ed. by J.H. Crosby, St. Augustine Press, South Bend IN 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Though these philosophers’ analysis covers ground Weil did not investigate, her concept of *lecture*, of how to read certain situations and people, is similar in some respects (S. WEIL, *Essai sur la notion de*

## 5. *The Relationship between Nature and the Supernatural*

This other reality is, as Weil points out in her draft, the “unique source of all the good” in this world, of “all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order” and all good acts<sup>20</sup>. Unblemished goodness, great beauty, truth and justice unaffected by ideology, prejudice and passion cannot be explained merely in human terms. They harken back to something else, stir longing in the heart, making it aware that immanence does not have the last word<sup>21</sup>.

Thus the supernatural good is not “a sort of supplement to natural good, as we are told, with support from Aristotle, for our greater comfort”, as Weil writes in her essay, *Human Personality (La Personne et le Sacré)* from 1943<sup>22</sup>. Human nature cannot be imagined without it (as if the human person could exist without this inbuilt orientation towards the good without imploding). In that way, Weil is close to Henri de Lubac’s analysis of the supernatural (whose works she probably did not read), as outlined by Pacheco Gonçalves’ above-mentioned article.

Does Weil cynically imply that true goodness does not exist in this world? No, but that it cannot be explained merely in terms of the mere immanent data of this world and must have its source somewhere else. A seemingly infinite love (like in Mother Teresa’s case) towards those often perceived as the most repugnant, beckons for an explanation beyond humanitarian altruism, self-seeking activism or profit<sup>23</sup>. Though Weil is wary of the fanaticism feeding on ideology or a false faith, these motivations do not seem to apply in this case<sup>24</sup>.

Weil’s concept of that other reality is strongly Platonic from the time of her Greek lessons as an adolescent, as Monique Broc-Lapeyre writes in *L’autre côté du ciel*<sup>25</sup>. From Plato, she took the idea that there are two realities, one subject to necessity and the other where the absolute good reigns. The paradox of how these two can exist side by side (as, for example, theodicy attempts to understand) became a topic of reflection for the rest of her life. The absolute good does not shy from being incarnate however – as seen in the previous point. It can be experienced in the concrete example of a heroic love or of a person radically committed to the good. More than that: these instances can become bridges to its absolute reality.

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*lecture*, in OC IV.1, pp. 73-79, in particular 77-78; *Dieu dans Platon*, in OC IV.2: *Écrits de Marseille (1941-1942)*, ed. by A. Castel-Bouchouchi *et al.*, Gallimard, Paris 2009, pp. 75-130, in particular pp. 91-92). In order to reach an adequate understanding of the other, one needs to attain *non-lecture* that excludes judgment, using love as lens.

<sup>20</sup> S. WEIL, *Selected Essays 1934-43*, p. 219. See also OC V.2, p. 272.

<sup>21</sup> S. WEIL, *Sur le Phèdre*, in OC IV.2, pp. 689-691, in particular p. 690. Indeed, the person who is in contact with the supernatural defies the pressures of the fleeting *Zeitgeist* and creates in himself a center of gravity. Therefore, Weil calls him a “king” whatever his social position may be (OC VI.3: *Cahiers (février 1942-juin 1942): La porte du transcendant*, ed. by A. Degrâces *et al.*, Gallimard, Paris 2002, p. 180).

<sup>22</sup> S. WEIL, *Selected Essays 1934-43*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> OC VI.2, pp. 473-474.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>25</sup> M. BROC-LAPEYRE, *L’autre côté du ciel*, in “Cahiers Simone Weil”, 35 (2/2012), pp. 215-231, in particular p. 216.

## 6. *The Metaxu – Bridges to the “Other Reality”*

In different parts of her work, Weil speaks either of bridges (*metaxu*) leading to the transcendent, implicit ways of loving God or the good, or holes through which the supernatural can enter, like pure science, beauty in art and in the world, religious ceremonies, one’s neighbor, friendship and suffering<sup>26</sup>. Beauty is the “easiest” to access, since, in her eyes, it is the only transcendental to descend into Plato’s allegorical cave. Human beings are shackled, surrounded by shadows, incapable of seeing reality before they go through a radical transformation of self, break their chains, move their atrophied limbs and climb up the steep hill leading them into the blinding sunlight with its eventual revelation of the good, truth, justice etc. But beauty, as she interprets it, manifests itself already in the cave, speaking of a different world before any inner change has happened. One might add that the good *et al.* also reveal themselves within the cave through those who have been outside. They reflect the good, having made it their own<sup>27</sup>.

Everybody comes across these *metaxu*. But how conscious is the subject of their presence? As Simone Weil writes in *Morale et littérature*, we live in a dream-world, imaging our past, projecting our future<sup>28</sup>. Weil interprets Plato’s shadows in the cave not only as people’s desire to escape thinking about suffering, death, and their own failings, but also as the effects of ideology furthered by propaganda and the group-think of collectivities. The worst consequence of this shadowy world is to reverse the nature of good and evil. Influenced by Romanticism, one tends to think the good is monotonous and unattractive, while evil is supposedly surprising and exciting; in reality, the reverse is true. Only when thinking of the good as its counterfeit, namely as self-righteousness, bigotry and sanctimoniousness, is it unattractive. In reality, the authentic good surprises each time anew, delights the heart and never becomes boring. Evil, on the other hand, sickeningly only gives more of the same. Don Juan desires monotonously ever more conquests, the avaricious additional money. Even the whole range of vices cannot remain exciting, but merely leads to a dependency one soon loathes. Dante’s depiction of the devil impacted in ice, incapable of transcending his hatred, embodies the nature of evil therefore perfectly.

But how can human beings break through the shadowy world into which they are born<sup>29</sup>? As already mentioned, beauty is key, as are the perception of eternal verities in the domain of mathematics, *caritas*, friendship, the good as reflected in the saints or as present supernaturally in the Eucharist, and the liturgy<sup>30</sup>. In *Morale et Littérature*, Weil

<sup>26</sup> OC IV.1, pp. 285-286; OC IV.2, pp. 262, 288-289 and 292. See also OC VI.3, p. 127.

<sup>27</sup> Chenavier wonders in his article *Les usages du surnaturel* if there are two paths to the supernatural: one intellectual, as depicted in the allegory of the Cave, and another seeking love like in the *Phaedrus*, where the charioteer has to control his wild horse in order to see and taste the heavenly Ideas (p. 386). Weil gives the answer herself in her notebooks where she writes that “ultimately, there is only one path to salvation in Plato; the different dialogues indicate different parts of the way” (OC VI.3, p. 60).

<sup>28</sup> S. WEIL, *Morale et Littérature*, in OC IV.1, pp. 90-95, in particular p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> Weil calls the situation of the prisoners in Plato’s allegory of the cave as being chained by original sin (OC IV.2, p. 96 [*Dieu dans Platon*]).

<sup>30</sup> OC VI.3, p. 310; OC IV.1, pp. 285-286; OC IV.2, pp. 262, 288-289 and 292.

states that only the encounter with extreme evil or holiness can shake people out of this lie<sup>31</sup>. When witnessing closely the evil of genocide, they can no longer fool themselves as to its true nature (except when blinded by ideology like the perpetrators). So paradoxically, evil can lead to the absolute good by contrast, without being strictly speaking a *metaxu* itself.

Hence, there are many modes of perceiving the supernatural, making it universally accessible<sup>32</sup>. Every person, according to Weil, unavoidably has to make a choice for or against the absolute good at some point in her life<sup>33</sup>. More dramatically still, the choice is either for the supernatural good or for evil. Furthermore, if the individual does not affirm the absolute good, but only the kind of good that is the contrary of evil, then he has not really rejected evil. Such an immanent good would, for example, be the disdain of the so-called good, self-righteous woman *vis-à-vis* a prostitute<sup>34</sup>. The first woman is no better than the latter – nay, perhaps even worse because of her hypocrisy – and her choice of “the good” is to her detriment. Had she selected the absolute good, she would reach out to the other without any judgment (*non-lecture* in Weilian terminology) but with compassion. Similarly, the person who expresses humanitarian views, but does not help concretely a person in need, has failed to choose the absolute good. Failing to choose is in and of itself a choice; it means rejecting the supernatural, the absolute good itself. No cozy compromise like pretending to live in an immanent world without radical demands is therefore possible. The consequence is to become a weathervane to the *Zeitgeist*, becoming subject to passions and ideologies; it means failing to follow the authentic call of every human being who is always in the making, for an actualization of his ultimate potential can only happen in response to the good.

However, this does not mean that merely believers or the pious can make this choice (indeed, like the Pharisees, they might select only the apparent good). The choice for the absolute good may well be implicit, just like the choice for God, according to Weil in *Formes de l'amour implicite de Dieu*<sup>35</sup>. A person adhering to a secular worldview can, without realizing it, be acting in accordance with the absolute good. This would explain the surprise of those in Christ's depiction of the last judgment who weren't aware of having clothed and fed him, but did so in tending to the least.

### 7. Other Lines of Argument

However, Weil does not merely offer an existential proof for the existence of “that other reality”, but also gives other arguments. Interestingly, it is in her article *Is There a Marxist*

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<sup>31</sup> OC IV.1, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> In her notebooks, she writes, for example, that “man only escapes the laws of this world for a moment of a flash. Moments of pause, of contemplation of pure intuition [...]. It is through these instants that he is capable of the supernatural” (OC VI.2, p. 201).

<sup>33</sup> S. WEIL, *Selected Essays 1934-43*, p. 23; OC IV.2, pp. 288-289. Unfortunately, however, the choice for evil happens in a semi-conscious way, having rejected the truth and chosen shadows instead (S. WEIL, *Lettre à Joë Bousquet*, in EAD., *Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu*, Gallimard, Paris 1962, pp.73-84, in particular pp. 77-8).

<sup>34</sup> OC VI.2, pp. 125-126.

<sup>35</sup> OC IV.1, pp. 285ff.



*Doctrine?* that she makes the longest analysis of the supernatural. Marxism defends materialism. Yet it is impossible to be a consistent materialist and Marxist, she states, except if all concern for the good were ignored. But instead, Marxism presupposes that the good, namely absolute justice at least for the proletariat, will be brought about by a dialectical materialism that denies its very existence. This is because, as Weil writes, “the very being of man is nothing else but a perpetual straining after an unknown [or ignored] good”, of some kind of absolute fulfillment which only the infinitely good can provide<sup>36</sup>. He may defend determinism, but will want to break out of it despite himself. Hence, Marxism itself, in her eyes, is an inferior religion, an “opium of the people”, trying to provide them some illusory kind of good set in a distant future<sup>37</sup>. This is at the core of every ideology and totalitarian regime: the claim of bringing about an utopic good while the means suggested could never of their own accord bring forth such an absolute. It falsely claims to unite necessity and the good – necessity reigning over this world and subjecting everybody while each person desires the good in some form – by stating that somehow necessity itself could produce the good. The temptation is great to believe like Marxism that this painful tension can be overcome by denying its existence. Yet both necessity and the absolute good have to be taken into account to do justice to reality<sup>38</sup>.

Though one cannot verify or refute the pure good since it is above human faculties, the supernatural has ramifications – accessible to reason and perception - on a lower level of reality, which are open to verification<sup>39</sup>. Weil uses the analogy of an island of blind inhabitants, cut off from the world, for whom light would be like the supernatural is to us. They could develop their own system of physics without referring to light. Since the latter is weightless, cannot be touched, smelled, heard or tasted, and offers no resistance, it would seem non-existent to them. But if one leaves light out of account, one cannot explain the growth of plants despite the law of gravity, nor how fruits and vegetables ripen<sup>40</sup>. To explain reality fully and rationally, light needs to be included in the equation of things. Similarly, one cannot understand sanctity, great beauty or *caritas* without their supernatural source.

Another confirmation of the supernatural’s existence is the universal consent of all “authentic religions”. For Weil, an authentic religion does not adore *force* or power in the guise of a worldly messianism (by wanting to crush all non-believers, for example). All genuine religions have at their core a mystical element, an encounter with the pure good, as she states. Though people tend to become sceptics when looking at the variety of religions, Weil believes that this common mystical core is a binding element. That it seems present in so many cultures is a confirmation (though not a proof in the strict

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<sup>36</sup> In S. WEIL, *Oppression and Liberty*, Routledge, London 2002, pp.160-184, in particular p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165

<sup>38</sup> This, for Weil, constitutes the greatness of Christianity: that it does not seek to find a false solution for this contradiction – by falsely promising to eliminate suffering, for example – but by discovering in suffering a supernatural meaning, in the cross a painful union of necessity and the good (*OC VI.3*, p. 64).

<sup>39</sup> S. WEIL, *Oppression and Liberty*, p. 167.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

sense) of the supernatural's existence. It would be too long to compare various religions here, but Weil's point is worth pondering<sup>41</sup>.

### 8. *Mystical Experiences – The Absolute Good is a Divine Person(s)*

Finally, Weil points to mystical experiences as an indirect and external mode of verification. Since they “escape [...] their faculties”, they remain mysterious, even to mystics. They only happen to some; but when these individuals seem neither deceitful, hysterical nor delusional, then their witness carries great weight. Simone Weil was speaking with the authority of her own mystical encounter, which she did not make public during her life-time<sup>42</sup>. Since her teens, Weil had been an agnostic, believing that the question of God's existence could not be resolved. She never expected that God could decide to reveal Himself. When He did so in November 1938 while she was reciting George Herbert's poem *Love III* and “Christ himself came down and took” her, it came as a great surprise<sup>43</sup>.

Weary of auto-suggestion, she did not start praying until three years later, when learning by heart the “Our Father” in Greek. Each time she would recite it with the utmost attention, she would be torn out of space and time in a mystical encounter. The divine person she would meet there would be more real than a close friend<sup>44</sup>.

Referring to mystical encounters seems the weakest argument philosophically. It is the hardest to verify, since it depends on the individual's honesty and on a divine person's initiative. Yet it reveals what is at the heart of the good. That good which reveals itself in some form (not necessarily mystically) to everyone seeking it with attention and love is ultimately a divine person<sup>45</sup>. This explains a number of things: first of all, why the supernatural is not perceived by everybody at all times. Though everyone with the right disposition will discover it, the moment cannot be predetermined, for it depends on another person's decision. Just as one cannot force another to give his attention or talk to someone at a specific instant, so one cannot coerce a divine person to do so<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167. One might object that Weil is glossing over the differences between religions both in their content as well as in their historical development. In his later comment on his article *The Unity and Diversity of Religions*, J. RATZINGER therefore speaks about the fundamental difference between religions adhering to a “mysticism of identity” where the subject loses his personhood to unite with the Divine, and those presupposing “a personal understanding of God”, where the distinction between the human person and a personal God is never effaced despite close union (in J. RATZINGER, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Engl. transl. by H. Taylor, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2003, pp. 15-54, in particular pp. 39 and 45).

<sup>42</sup> She only wrote about them confidentially to Father Joseph-Marie Perrin (S. WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, pp. 44-49) and the writer Joë Bousquet (EAD., *Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu*, p. 81).

<sup>43</sup> This doesn't mean that it had come unprepared. See Weil's autobiographical account in S. WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, pp. 38-45.

<sup>44</sup> OC IV.1, p. 278; S. WEIL, *Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de Dieu*, p. 81; EAD., *Attente de Dieu*, p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> See OC VI.3, p. 120: “God who is nothing else than the good itself”. A mystical experience is characterized by intense union with God, which often comes with ecstasy that the more usual experience of the good through the *metaxu* or in ordinary prayer does not yield.

<sup>46</sup> See M. SCHELER, *Vom Ewigen im Menschen*, Francke, Bern 1968, p. 331: “Only a person can keep silent”. Quoted by J.F. CROSBY, *On Empathy*, p. 24.

Though one can assume that an infinitely good, divine being doesn't act or refrain from acting for facetious reasons, it is still His choice – though one regulated by laws, as Weil would add. The attitude of waiting, so important in the gospel and in spiritual life, watching for the master who will come like a thief in the night is a necessary condition for meeting him<sup>47</sup>. Otherwise, one will sleep through one's life only to be woken up in the next to realize one has rejected the absolute good by failing to desire it.

One could add that the longing for the good is ultimately – if one pays close attention – a desire for absolute, unconditional love, something that only an absolutely good and infinite person could offer: a person – since a being without reason, will or heart could not desire union. For this union to be completely fulfilling, the divine person would have to be absolutely and infinitely good (for even the faintest trace of evil would prevent a consummating communion) to assuage the infinite longing of the human heart. Not only that: this divine person would need to desire communion. All of this presupposes love to be of his very essence<sup>48</sup>. Here too one can find an implicit pointer as to the nature of that “other reality”.

These kinds of arguments drawn from the philosophy of religion will not satisfy somebody with purely empiricist and rationalistic presuppositions<sup>49</sup>. But Weil's claim is that this “other reality”, even if it is not recognized as God, is verifiable in the realm accessible to reason, has an important explanatory function and follows strict laws that are no less stringent than the laws of nature. Indeed, part of Weil's project was to chart out a map of these laws.

The knowledge of the relationship between the human person and the supernatural demands a precision greater than that of mathematics and of science, as Weil formulates perhaps hyperbolically in her notebooks<sup>50</sup>. But to achieve this kind of exactness, perception needs to be focused through attention and sharpened by the lens of love, leading to “supernatural knowledge”. It is like touching, feeling, or tasting something: “The soul only knows certainly that she is hungry [...] the reality of her hunger is not a belief, but a certitude”. And “when one eats bread, and even when one has eaten, one knows that the bread is real”<sup>51</sup>. Once one has tasted the absolute good and experienced fulfillment (though it implies the cross), one is in no doubt about its existence<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> OC IV.1, p. 278. S. WEIL, *Réflexion sur le bon usage des études scolaires*, in OC IV.1, pp. 255-262, in particular pp. 257 and 259.

<sup>48</sup> OC IV.2, p. 91. God is love “like an emerald is green” (OC VI.4, p. 171).

<sup>49</sup> In her article *En quoi consiste l'inspiration occitanienne*, Weil writes that if the Age of Enlightenment had read Plato, “it would not have called knowledge and mere natural faculties ‘light’”. For “the image of the cave makes manifest that man's natural condition is darkness, that he is born in it, that he lives and that he dies in it if he does not turn towards the light that descends from a place situated on the other side of heaven [...]” (OC IV.2, pp. 415-424, in particular p. 424).

<sup>50</sup> OC VI.2, p. 338.

<sup>51</sup> OC IV.1, pp. 333-335. See also p. 278.

<sup>52</sup> “Nonetheless the logic of supernatural reason is more rigorous than that of natural reason” (OC VI.4, p. 139). For lack of space, I have only hinted at the role of suffering and of the cross in Weil's thought in general and in regards the supernatural.

## 9. *A Science of the Soul*

Though the supernatural works in hidden ways like yeast in contrast to collectivities and totalitarian regimes that influence the masses, as Weil writes in *Cette guerre est une guerre de religions*, it is therefore no less real<sup>53</sup>. The latter's impact may be more immediate and visible on a broad scale, but is not lasting since it doesn't rely on an informed and conscious choice; the masses can easily be moved to change in one way or another. Therefore, power wavers and switches sides, while a supernatural motivation like heroic love can move mountains<sup>54</sup>. Therefore, Weil thought radical love could change the balance of forces between occupied France and Germany. A love for authentic justice which is nothing else than a "folie d'amour" could, for example, inspire the French to sabotage on a large scale the German communication lines, bringing German action to a halt. It gave England the capacity to stand up against Germany when all odds seemed to be going against it during the Battle of Britain. This folly of love, inspired by the absolute good, should not be disregarded by *Realpolitik*, for it changes the scales<sup>55</sup>. Who would have expected that the USSR would come down after 70 years of reign, triggered by massive peaceful demonstrations?

This other reality can change the play of forces, for like the small mustard-seed – Weil is using New Testament language here – it can grow into a tree in which the birds of the sky sit<sup>56</sup>: grace can counteract *pesanteur*, the law of gravity within the moral realm; the supernatural goes against *force* that subjugates the whole world. It exists side by side with necessity, and it invisibly – yet sometimes clearly – alters things<sup>57</sup>. Those suffering, crushed by necessity, can mysteriously still be transformed by the good. Power and prestige may rule the world, bringing about war at times, but islands of true love can suddenly appear, inexplicably, as if parachuted into this world. Gravity may pull everything downward, yet grace – like the influence of light on plants – can allow persons to grow wings<sup>58</sup>. Though Marx did pioneering work by recognizing force at the center of human interaction, as Weil points out, he missed a central element by omitting the supernatural in his analysis, an "energy" that can alter the play of forces<sup>59</sup>.

This other reality is transformative, if responded to with longing and love. Only in its light can human beings realize the need for such a transformation in the first place<sup>60</sup>. Only love itself, i.e. a divine person, can turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh – which is the greatest miracle of all. Hence, "the only supernatural fact down here is sanctity itself [...] it is the fact that the divine commandments become for those who love God a

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<sup>53</sup> In S. WEIL, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, Gallimard, Paris 1957, pp. 98-108, in particular p. 108.

<sup>54</sup> OC II.3, pp. 236-237 ; S. WEIL, *Luttons-nous pour la justice*, in EAD., *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, pp. 45-57.

<sup>55</sup> S. WEIL, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, pp. 57 and 106-7.

<sup>56</sup> OC IV.2, p. 153.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 287.

<sup>58</sup> OC VI.3, pp. 44, 61, 65 and 383.

<sup>59</sup> S. WEIL, *Oppression and Liberty*, pp. 162 and 167.

<sup>60</sup> In her notebooks, Weil writes that "life in us is dead from the supernatural perspective". Yet knowing and desiring the good, means that the supernatural appears in us like chlorophyll in plants uniting itself with grace coming down like light from the sun to create a new life (OC VI.3, p. 42).

motive, an acting power [...] like gas in a car”<sup>61</sup>. Their motives are nourished directly by the good of which the Eucharist is the incarnate presence here<sup>62</sup>.

Weil is very skeptical of miracles in the sense of a direct intervention of God, however, since He lets the sun shine on the good and evil. Having withdrawn from creation out of love to give human beings freedom, He lets necessity take its course<sup>63</sup>. What we consider miraculous, however, like walking on water, is simply the expression of other laws, less familiar than the laws of nature, but no less stringent. Hence, these kinds of wonders would be the sign that a certain level of spirituality has been achieved. It would go too far, however, to analyze Weil’s ideas on miracles here. Suffice it to say that she does not see them as an embodiment or proof of the supernatural *per se*.

Similarly, there are principles regarding the soul and psyche of human beings, making a science of the soul possible, and which she started establishing<sup>64</sup>. The immanent laws of this world lead people to get tired of the long-lasting suffering of others, to make them responsible, like Job’s friends. Human beings react like chicken who peck on the weak<sup>65</sup>. While mere humanitarianism fails to give people the energy to help people with their whole heart on a continuous basis, they can stand in line for hours to obtain food for themselves<sup>66</sup>. To alter this play of forces, a different element needs to enter the picture, an energy coming from the outside, namely grace, making individuals tend to the chronically ill when the flesh recoils<sup>67</sup>. Mere warmth, humanitarianism, natural goodness will not last. It takes *caritas*, feeding on the infinite source of Love itself, to weather these storms. When people adhering to a secular worldview exhibit this goodness, then – Weil would say – they are implicitly loving God.

#### 10. Concluding Thoughts: The Relationship between Supernatural Knowledge and Reason

Weil’s analysis is still pertinent for our times. A false understanding of the natural, the supernatural and their relationship is dangerous, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown. For ideologies, on which totalitarian regimes were built, turn a relative, natural good into an absolute, pseudo-supernatural one, promising an utopic future never to come. Though the temptation of idolatry is as old as mankind, modern times have made it particularly destructive. It is therefore vital to avoid this trap.

The supernatural exists, as Weil tried to show. It can be known not because it can be verified scientifically, but because its impact can be traced, its laws can be drawn, and its presence can be experienced. It would, on the contrary, be narrow-minded and reductive to limit philosophy to a certain kind of perception. Why the scientific method should

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<sup>61</sup> OCV.2, p. 332.

<sup>62</sup> OC VI.2, p. 151.

<sup>63</sup> For an analysis of Weil’s approach to theodicy, see chapter 6 of my book *Simone Weil’s Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretations of Ancient Greek Texts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 143-177.

<sup>64</sup> OC V.2, p. 357; OC VI.1: *Cahiers (1933-septembre 1941)*, ed. by A. Degrâces *et al.*, Gallimard, Paris 1994, , p. 309.

<sup>65</sup> OC IV.1, p. 350.

<sup>66</sup> OC VI.2, p. 110.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

necessarily apply to the humanities is a methodological question that first needs addressing. Isn't it more rational to choose a method that is appropriate to the object investigated rather than to deny the very existence of that object because it doesn't fit the methods used in one area? This would be narrow-minded and a quite irrational reason for failing to do justice to reality. It means putting the cart in front of the horse – like eliminating colors because I happen to be blind, or denying the existence of music because I am deaf. Of course, in the case of defective sense-perception, the person in question has the witness of the majority of people who can tell her about colors and sounds. But if the supernatural is only experienced with difficulty, perceived through a glass darkly, depends on certain attitudes, and on the decision of a divine person, then it would make sense that only a few have experienced a mystical encounter. Others will have to make do with the more indirect means that have been listed above in order to gain awareness of the absolute good's existence.

It would be wrong to reject *prima facie* what is incomprehensible to us. As Weil writes in her notebooks: “We know through the means of intelligence that what the intelligence does not apprehend is more real than what it apprehends”<sup>68</sup>. Since reality is rich, it is normal for much to remain obscure. This is all the more the case since it contains paradoxes, or as Weil prefers to say, contradictions<sup>69</sup>. Rather than embracing an Hegelian dialectics where two contradictory positions are “synthesized”, Weil defines the method of philosophy as “conceiving clearly insoluble problems in their insolubility, then to contemplate them, nothing more, fixedly, unremittingly [...] while waiting”<sup>70</sup>. It would be treacherous to deny one element of the apparent contradiction, in order to reach an easy, but false solution. Instead, paradoxes constitute a leverage, allowing to enter the mystery of the absolute good. It takes radical love of truth to accept reality in its unfathomable depth, with its painful tension of the good and necessity, with its sorrows and messiness.

To eliminate the supernatural and grace therefore means falsifying reality. It means removing the paradoxical that is a sign of reality offering us resistance, showing us that it is not merely a product of our own imagination, mind or unconscious desires<sup>71</sup>. The mystery of paradoxes such as grace and freedom, necessity and the good, offers a depth that dwarfs us. It is not non-sense, something that might be simply the result of a scrambled brain, but shows us that we stand before something greater than our reason. It takes wisdom, much reflection and contemplation to enter more deeply into paradox,

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 343.

<sup>69</sup> She does not mean thereby states-of-affairs or propositions contradicting the principle of non-contradiction or of identity.

<sup>70</sup> OC VI.4, p. 362. “Having faith in the reality of something if it can neither be verified nor demonstrated”, as Weil writes in her notebooks, “only means giving it a certain level of attention” (OC VI.3, p. 65). Her approach is therefore anything but fideistic.

<sup>71</sup> “Our thought tries to rid itself of contradiction and cannot. It comes from outside. It is real” (OC VI.3, p. 64). De Lubac also said in *Le Surnaturel* that theology constitutes the unique situation “where the paradox is the necessary sign of the truth” (quoted in J.M. PACHECO GONÇALVES, *Le mystère du surnaturel: Simone Weil et Henri de Lubac*, p. 249). The heretic denies one side of the paradox as PACHECO GONÇALVES writes in *Le Mystère du surnaturel* (*ibidem*, p. 252).

which is “the doorway towards the supernatural”, indeed, its manifestation and path. She continues: “one can only knock. It is another who opens”<sup>72</sup>.

Apprehending reality with all its facets, knowing people from the inside through the means of empathetic love and perceiving what lies at the very center of the universe, namely the supernatural, entails an engagement of the whole person – even more, demands her transformation. Human beings are not monads, pure intellects, living in a solipsistic world where merely empirically verifiable things exist or matter. Living in such an aseptic, sterile world would lead to the end of civilization, a brave new world in which human beings have lost their heart and moral sense. Indeed, Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* expresses the inhumane effects of such a worldview. Between the empiricist’s world and a Dickensian, Weilian or indeed Dantean, i.e. one that sees Love at the center of the universe, the choice is easy. To my mind, it is intellectually much more satisfactory. Indeed, the supernatural may be small like a mustard-seed, but it can become the Archimedian point from which the world can be lifted out of its hinges<sup>73</sup>. It is to our detriment to ignore it.

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<sup>72</sup> OC VI.3, p. 98.

<sup>73</sup>And it demands death to self (*ibidem*, p. 272).