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Notes on Weil's Mysticism

One of the most striking passages from Weil's *Gravity and Grace* (1952)¹ concerns the relationship between three seemingly central concepts—*creation*, *gravity*, and *grace*—in her thinking and her practice of mysticism:

“Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace and the descending movement of the second degree of grace.” (4)

This essay is dedicated to interpreting this passage. My aim is not primarily exegetic, however. I aim to understand Weil's distinct form of mysticism and to place it within the Christian mystical tradition. What emerges in my reading of Weil is the following: Contrary to the meta-historical hypothesis² that mystical practices spring from the desire to overcome the duality of *mind* and *body*, Weil's mysticism arises out of an intense impulse to overcome the duality of *subject* and *object*.

The rest of the essay falls in three sections. In the first, I argue that the vertical movement in Weilian space corresponds to the degree of *being*; that is, to ascend is to *exist more*, and to descend is to *exist less*. In the second, I will clarify the relationship between the three kinds of movements. In particular, I show that grace (ascending) is God's movement in creation, while gravity governs the movement towards *destruction*, grace (descending) governs the movement towards *decreation*. Finally, in the third section, I argue that for Weil, God is simultaneously the only pure subject and only pure object and in contrast, creatures are, in reality, neither a subject nor an object, i.e. nothing. This ontological reading of Weil

¹ Weil, Simone (1952). *Gravity and Grace*. New York: Routledge.

² Developed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and students in a graduate seminar on Mystical Women (2023)

provides a plausible interpretation of the drive behind her mystical pursuits, namely as arising from her desire to overcome the subject-object duality. Or, so I will argue.

I.

Consider once again Weil's declaration (paraphrased as a formula): Creation = gravity (descending) + grace (ascending) + grace² (descending).³ What does this spatial analogy map onto, i.e. what does the vertical movement track? If one begins with the supposition that gravity implies heaviness and that grace implies lightness—as in *graceful* ballet dancer—he quickly runs into a hermeneutic issue: how could grace both be the movement of ascending and descending movement? Before attempting to interpret the precise notion of 'gravity' and of 'grace', therefore, it is prudent to understand how Weilian space is configured; i.e., to understand what it means to ascend and what it means to descend.

Given the Christian cultural understanding of space where heaven (and therefore God) is high in the sky and hell (and the devil) is below us, it would be easy to interpret Weil's notion of space as one that reflects this dual moral structure. In fact, piecing together aphorisms contained in *Gravity and Grace* (the section, not the book), it is not difficult to interpret vertical movement as a measure of *moral value*. Weil writes, "Everything we can base is a phenomenon due to gravity" (2) and elsewhere, "Obedience to the force of gravity. The greatest sin" (3). These passages seem to establish one half of the puzzle: that descending movement is sinful, i.e. *wrong*, understood morally. Further, in order to "rise in the domain of moral gravity," Weil writes, one must "lower oneself": "Moral gravity makes us fall toward the heights" (4). The 'heights' to which she refers, one might think, is moral goodness.

³ "Second degree of grace" is not the most accurate translation. In French this phrase is "deuxième puissance de la grâce." Elsewhere, "deuxième puissance" is translated as "raised to the second power" (4) and this rather mathematical interpretation provides more clarity to this aphorism. Given Weil's mathematical prowess, it is not biographically implausible to read it so literally.

But interpretative questions remain. It is puzzling as to why Weil uses the term 'moral gravity' instead of grace. If Weil's space is configured by degrees of moral goodness, then we cannot intelligibly distinguish between 'rising in the domain of moral gravity' from 'the ascending movement of grace' using the criteria of moral goodness. And presumably, they are two different movements since Weil presents gravity and grace as antonyms. (Cf. "All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception." (1, her italics).)

Furthermore, if we interpret Weil's space as a proxy for moral value, then why should one first 'lower herself' in order to be morally vindicated? It is clear that we cannot interpret vertical movement as reflecting change in moral value in all cases. This point may seem trivial, since it would be perfectly natural to interpret 'lowering oneself' as depriving oneself of worldly desires and leading an ascetic life. This interpretation is well-supported by both biographical evidence—e.g. Weil's work at the Peugeot car factory and involvement with the Spanish Civil War—and textual evidence—see, especially, *Self-Effacement* and *Mysticism of the Work*. Moreover, given Weil's insistence on "contradiction" being "the criterion of the real" (98),⁴ it is tempting to conclude that Weil's descriptions of ascending and descending movement are rife with contradictions. I think, however, that Weil's use of spatial analogies is more coherent and systematic than one might think, once we understand Weilian space to track degrees of *being*, which also indirectly tracks moral value (since, as I will clarify later, for Weil what is good is what exists). I will motivate and argue for this reading in the rest of this section.

I will begin by noting that gravity and the two kinds of grace, according to Weil, constitutes the composition of *creation*. In Weil's ontology, there is only God and creation; that is, creation is all that which exists, other than God himself. Weil does not think creation

⁴ A side note: one can glean this idea from the texts of many mystics, notably, in the poetry of the Spanish mystic San Juan de la Cruz.

is part of God: "There exists a 'deifugal' force. Otherwise all would be God" (33). Despite that at times Weil appears to have pantheistic tendencies (cf. *Meaning of the Universe*, e.g. "We should identify ourselves with the universe itself" (140).), Thibon (the editor) is right to note that the critical difference between Weil's ontology and that of a pantheist is that "God transcends the universe" (140) for Weil, whereas God is everywhere for the pantheist. (I take it that 'creation,' 'the universe,' and 'the world' refer to the same object extensionally, while the meaning of each term accentuates the different significations.)

A transcendent God implies that there is an insurmountable distance between God and His creation, one which she identifies as "the distance between the necessary and the good" (105). Strictly speaking, the (absolute, or necessary) good only exists in God, i.e. outside of this world.⁵ Necessity, by contrast, exists in the world as a mirror of the good, or "an image by which the mind can conceive of the indifference, the impartiality of God" (ibid.). By necessity, I understand Weil to be referring to universal principles and laws that govern movement within Weilian space, i.e. gravity and grace. For Weil, unity (of creatures, of the universe, of contradictions, etc.), which is to be bound by necessity, is the defining characteristic of reality because it mirrors God's goodness by being whole or universal.

On the other hand, limitlessness is the mark of unreality because it is by nature "indefinite [in] matter, space, time" (93). Despite the fact that creation is governed by necessary laws and principles, which are in and of themselves 'indifferent' or morally silent, limitlessness obfuscates this fact by substituting necessity with our illusory, subjective, and *ad hoc* understanding of the world. Evil's constitution, Weil writes, is "the unreality which takes the goodness from the good" (76). An prominent example of evil in the world is our participation in the vicious "good-evil cycle" (105)⁶. Roughly put, this cycle refers to the mechanism by which an indefinite, merely socio-historically contingent understanding of the

⁵ Though, the good *does* exist in our world insofar as it is subject to chance, i.e. contingent or non-necessary (cf. *Chance*).

⁶ A subject on which Weil elaborates further, in her famed *Iliad* essay.

good is, at a different point in space (culture) and time (epoch), taken to be evil and thus replaced with another contingent understanding of the good by the use of force (cf. *The Great Beast*). This 'limitation' (upon us) will continue ad infinitum, unless we escape it, Weil writes, by "rising up towards unity or going down towards the limitless" (ibid.). I submit that this example, containing another spatial analogy, helps us orient the configuration of Weilian space. So, let us have a closer inspection.

What does it mean to 'rise up' towards unity or 'go down' towards the limitless? Here is my hypothesis: Rising up to unity, I take it, is to *exist more*; descending towards limitlessness, I take it, is to *exist less*. That is, vertical movement in Weilian space tracks degrees of being. This follows from the idea that the principle of unity is the mark of existence, and that limitlessness is the mark of non-existence. While God—and the corresponding unity and the good—is ontologically kept apart from the world, God also appears as a critical horizon of absolute unity for us. We can only indirectly induce God's presence in our world by contemplating universal laws, hence, Weil proclaims that "necessity is God's veil" (104). In other words, God *is* present in creation, but only "under the form of absence" (109), which we can feel from experiencing the necessary and deduce from contemplating the distance between the necessary and the good. Similarly, evil is part of this world but pure evil does not exist, as unbound limitlessness does not exist: "Evil is limitless but it is not infinite. Only the infinite limits the limitless" (69). So, the idea of non-existence or unbound limitlessness only presents itself to us as a theoretical postulate that specifies the bounds of creation. As such, we can now define the domain of Weilian space: God, or absolute being, is the non-inclusive 'upper' bounds of creation, while absolute evil, or pure limitlessness and thus non-existence, marks the non-inclusive 'lower' bounds of creation. Thus: "If 1 is God, ∞ is the devil" (93).

Concretely taken, Weil thinks that rising up towards unity entails purification of evil by God via deliverance through grace (i.e. “to depart from this world” (105)), while going down towards limitlessness—and thus non-existence—entails purification of evil by gravity, namely in rationalizing it through conventions, i.e. a relativized system of beliefs and practices, of the society in power, that is, through “the service of the false God (of the social Beast under whatever form it may be)” (168). But I think that Weil falters here with her own spatial topography: going down towards non-existence does not necessarily entail purification of evil by gravity. In particular, one can only begin to receive the ascending form of grace once we comply with the descending movement of grace which is directed towards non-existence. Let me now clarify what I mean.

II.

Once again, recall *the* formula: “Creation = gravity (descending) + grace (ascending) + grace² (descending).” We have now clarified the domain of Weilian space, which is defined by the upper bound of God (pure good) and the lower bound of non-existence (pure evil). In between them, there is creation, which is understood as “good broken up into pieces and scattered throughout evil” (69). Seen in this light, the ascending movement of grace pulls us creatures up towards pure existence, or unity, while the two descending movements, i.e. of gravity and of the second degree of grace, govern the movement towards non-existence. The main interpretative challenge, then, seems to be distinguishing between the descending movements of gravity and of the second degree of grace. Before we get there, however, it will be useful to begin by comparing Weil's characterizations of gravity and grace in general.

Gravity, according to Weil, is the law that controls “all the *natural* movements of the soul” (1) while grace is the exception, presumably governing (or enabling) *supernatural*

movements of the soul. Gravity is the natural, human mechanical imperative to spread evil beyond oneself (5) in an attempt to reach a desirable but ultimately illusory essential equilibrium (7). Wanting to hurt others when one is herself harmed, seeking revenge, and not being able to forgive the aggressor (i.e. to construe oneself as the victim) are some examples of gravity operating on humans. The only escape from the natural movement of gravity is to seek supernatural help, or grace. Unlike the concept of gravity, the concept of grace is difficult to pin down, and much easier to grasp as a negative definition, i.e. as something that is not gravity.⁷ Thus, we may say that if gravity spreads evil, grace purifies evil. As we have seen previously, grace purifies evil by enabling the ascending movement towards unity, whereas gravity, while affording temporary deliverance through the use of force, ultimately perpetuates the good-evil cycle. Our configuration of Weilian space allows us to understand the ascending movement of grace and descending movement of gravity in terms of degrees of existence, and by extension, in terms of degrees of good and evil.

But what of the descending movement of the second degree of grace? Namely, how could the movement towards non-existence be considered grace, rather than gravity? It is not a one-off fluke that Weil characterizes grace as descending movement. Recall that, according to Weil, 'to lower oneself' is to rise in the domain of moral gravity. At one point, Weil even defines grace simply as "the law of the descending movement" (4). Moreover, she appears to urge herself/us to "come down by a movement in which gravity plays no part," and asks, "Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what winds raised to the second power can make things come down without weight?" (4) Clearly, Weil thinks it is possible to descend *supernaturally*, without weight through grace, as opposed to *naturally* through gravity.

⁷ At least as someone who experiences the effects of gravity but not enough that of grace.

I think that the key to understanding this descending form of grace is the concept of *decreation*. Decreation, Weil writes, is “to make something created pass into the uncreated” (32). One may think that decreation is opposed to creation, but this is not the case. Decreation is a proper part of creation: “We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves” (33), and thus, “we are co-creators” (ibid.). The proper antonym of the concept of decreation is *destruction*, which is “to make something created pass into nothingness” and “a blameworthy substitute for decreation” (32). Decreation, I take it, is the concrete manifestation of supernatural downwards movement towards non-existence (i.e. the second degree of grace) while destruction is the product of natural human mechanics governed by the descending movement of gravity.

Decreation is supernatural insofar as we need to seek grace in order to uncreate ourselves: “May God grant me to become nothing” (34). The precondition to decreation is to understand our limitations and suffering as constitutive of decreation, that is, as a favor granted to us by God rather than ask for removal of such difficulties. Weil writes, “In general we must not wish for the disappearance of any of our troubles, but grace to transform them” (35). Actions that try to remove affliction and suffering are governed by gravity and lead to destruction (and thus evil) since the natural human tendency is to seek equilibrium by harming others in the same way we perceive ourselves to be harmed. By contrast, through conceiving of human limitations as God's gift and therefore “undoing the creature in us,” we are able to “re-establish order” and ascend towards unity (34). In other words, “that which is low in us [must] go downwards so that what is high can go upwards” (ibid.), and the creature in us is that which is low and thus must be decreated. While both destruction and decreation entail movement towards nonexistence, we can make a distinction between the two forms: the former out of obedience to gravity, and later due to grace. So, grace can be understood as the conjunction of the laws that govern the ascending movement of the fragments of good within

creation towards unity, and the descending movement of the fragments of evil within creation towards non-existence. Gravity, by contrast, forces both the fragments of good and the evil within us towards non-existence in an indiscriminate fashion. Thus, obedience to gravity implies degradation of what really exists (i.e. the fragments of good), and as such for Weil, obedience to this force constitutes the greatest sin.

But how can we construe our limitations as creatures, that is the fact that all our natural movement is governed by gravity, as a gift of God? "Limitation" according to Weil, "is the evidence God loves us" (105). Since "God could only create by hiding himself" (38), it is necessary that gravity (i.e. as the 'deifugal' force) and thus evil (as a shadow of the good) is part of the constitution of the world. Otherwise, "there would be nothing but himself" (ibid.). And creation, Weil thinks, is a perpetual act of love (33). The fact that God created demonstrates God's love for His creation, and so the fact that we exist demonstrates God's love for us. But, Weil writes, "God can only love himself" and so "his love for us is love for himself through us" (32). This creates the imperative of decreation: we must decreate ourselves so God can love himself more perfectly.

There is an obvious theological tension here: if God is already perfect, why should our participation be required in such a manner? As I read Weil, the answer lies in the fact that God is ontologically whole but nonetheless is incomplete as a *subject* without the participation of his creation. "Our consent," Weil writes, "is necessary in order that [God] may *perceive* his own creation through us. Without consent he performs this marvel" (40-41, my italics). It is not that our existence and action add, ontologically speaking, to God; on the contrary, "my participation can add nothing to it, my non-participation can take nothing from the reality of this perfect and infinite joy" (37). Our participation is inconsequential to God's being. But, our participation is required for creation to be in "a perfect union of love" (42) with God. Because we are creatures governed naturally by gravity, which breeds evil in the

world, we must decreate ourselves for God and creation to be united. God cannot do this, because if gravity—and thus indeterminacy and evil—was not part of the constitution of creation, there would only be God. In short: “He who created us without our help will not save us without our consent”⁸ (38).

If God is ontologically complete without creation, it raises the question: Why did God create in the first place? There is no explicit treatment of this theological puzzle within Weil's corpus, but Weil seems to suggest that we can only conceive of an answer to this question by considering God's very own subjectivity (*qua* love). In the rest of this essay, I pursue a rather speculative reading of Weil's conception of subjectivity—and by extension, objectivity—in an attempt to understand the impulse behind Weil's own mystical practice.

III.

“The presence of God,” Weil writes, “should be understood in two ways”:

As Creator, God is present in everything which exists as soon as it exists. The presence for which God needs the co-operation of the creature is the presence of God *not as a Creator*, but *as Spirit*. The first presence is the presence of creation. The second is the presence of decreation. (38, my italics)

By the presence of God as a Creator, I take Weil to be referring to the objective qualities of God. As soon as something exists, so long as it is really something and not an illusion, i.e. making something of nothing, God is present in it. Despite the fact that Weil's God is transcendent, i.e. ontologically outside of this world, God is present in every object since its existence implies the existence of creation at large (i.e., unified) and, by extension, the existence of the creator. Each entity that exists is part of a larger unity of objects that exist (namely, the universe of created things), and for that reason each thing is objectively

⁸ Weil attributes this quote to Saint Augustine.

incomplete when conceived of as a standalone object. Thus, in order for created things to be more perfect as an object, we must cease to represent each entity as a standalone object, that is, to defy our nature dictated by *principium individuationis*.⁹ Thus, Weil writes, “We are a part which has to imitate the whole” (140) and that “We should identify ourselves with the universe itself” (ibid.). In short: there is no proper object other than the whole of creation. And the unity of creation, I take it, refers to the objective component of God's being.

By contrast, the presence of God as Spirit must be understood as articulating the subjective part of God's being, or God's *love* for us creatures. The presence of God as Spirit is understood as the presence of decreation. Indeed, the ‘perfect union of love’ between God and creation, something that decreation aims at, has a subjective character. Weil writes, “I can easily imagine that [God] loves that *perspective* of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am. But I act as a screen. I must withdraw so that he may *see* it” (41, my italics). This passage seems to suggest that the decreation of the self-referential ‘I’ is ultimately motivated by the idea that God's very own subjectivity might fill the void of our subjectivity created by decreation.

So, God's presence in the universe is characterized by the objective unity of creation on one hand and the subjective *total* (in the sense of complete, multi-perspectival) experience by God's Spirit on the other. Understood as such, God appears in *our* universe—as opposed to the transcendental entity that exists outside of it—as the only *pure object* and the only *pure subject*. I take it that God's presence in creation, analyzed in this dual form, is the conceptual basis of Weil's understanding of the ascending movement (towards objective unity) and descending movement (towards nullification of individual subjectivity) of grace. Seen in this light, we can finally comprehend why the descending movement constitutes ‘grace raised to the second power’: the ascending movement of grace in creation, which is brought on by

⁹ *Principium individuationis*, or principle of individuation, is an essential characteristic of human experience according to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818).

God's love for his creation, is the pre-condition to the descending movement of grace, which allows us the choice to "refuse to exist outside God" (40). Weil writes, "God can love in us only this consent to withdraw in order to make way for him, just as he himself, our creator, withdrew in order that we might come into being. This double operation has no other meaning than love [...]" (41). God's movement in creation is the concrete manifestation of the ascending movement of grace; Our movement in decreation is the concrete manifestation of the descending movement of grace. The ascending movement is enough to ensure the reality of the objective unity of the universe, while the descending movement is necessary to ensure the subjective unity (i.e., presence of God's Spirit in creation).

So, it is unsurprising that for Weil, "Obedience to the force of gravity," which corresponds to believing in the reality of our individual subjectivity and therefore to aggrandizing our ego, constitutes "the greatest sin" (3). To believe in the reality of human subjectivity implies confusing "the essence of necessary with that of the good" (105), wherein our subjectivity, individual or collective, takes itself to be the arbiter of what *really* exists (including, especially, moral values) when in reality, human knowledge and action in principle cannot make contact with what is real.¹⁰ Weil's mystical practice, I speculate, is motivated by the insight that the self-referential 'I' really refers to nothing at all: We are neither a (complete) object, since the only pure object is the entirety of the universe, nor a (complete) subject, since the only pure subject is God's Spirit in our world. But, due to the forces of gravity, we are under the illusion that we are both a coherent subject and a whole object. The point of Weil's mystical practice, I take it, is to negate both our subjectivity and our objectivity through contemplation and (in)action:

To uproot oneself socially and vegetatively.

To exile oneself from every earthly country.

¹⁰ Weil's criticism of subjectivity, in my view, comes very close to Hegel's critique of the modern, alienated form of *Geist* in his *Phenomenology*.

To do all that from the outside, is a substitute (*ersatz*) for decreation. It results in unreality.

But by uprooting oneself one seeks greater reality. (39)

The greater reality that Weil speaks of is one in which the 'I' ceases to exist, both in terms of its subjectivity and objectivity. But there lies a paradox here. We cannot contemplate or act if, to begin with, we are not subjects or creation is filled with particular objects. That is, intentional activity seems to presuppose that there exists a subject and a discrete object that is being related by intentionality. I think that Weil was painfully aware of this contradiction; this is the crux of why, in her words, "Human life is *impossible*" (94, original italics). 'I' ought to be a void, but we do not have the capacity to realize this. Human nature is such that we can only know and act within the paradigm of subject-object dualism. Thus, Weil's mysticism, I submit, is driven by the all-too-clear understanding of the nature of human knowledge and action, and the corresponding intense desire to overcome it.